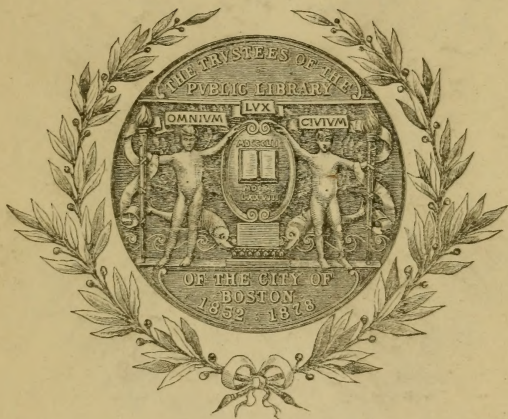


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THE HIGH PRIESTESS

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HIGH PRIESTESS

By H.B.

ROBERT GRANT

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CHAPTER I

MARY ARNOLD'S great happiness was made up of several ingredients. First and foremost there was the consciousness of being rapturously in love. She had looked forward to such a blissful experience, but she had not supposed she could be won so quickly. Yet this was just the way in which she was proud to be won—swept off her feet by the impetuosity of a lover the genuineness of whose ardor left nothing to be desired.

Then there was the agreeable sense of self-congratulation at having refused Henry Ives Thornton, who from the point of view of pecuniary ability to provide everything which any girl could desire, was indisputably the most eligible bachelor in Benham. Not that she had hesitated; it had been enough that his attentions—his declaration of passion left her emotionally cold. But the circle of her relatives and friends had made plain to her that they considered she was throwing away one of the signal opportunities of life—a chance which would never recur. Now by waiting she had vindicated her refusal to surrender to mere eligibility. What was much more significant, she had justified her own faith that the right man would present himself and that when he did her heart would reciprocate in full measure the ardor which he manifested. However it might be with other women, she assured herself that neither the material engrossments

nor the feminine emancipations of the age had diminished her capacity for intense feeling toward a lover. The modern woman demanded that the man who would win her should be worthy of her, and that she should be thrillingly conscious of that worthiness.

Marriage was a mating of bodies and of kindred souls. There was no gainsaying that one of those elfish ironies of destiny which draw little men to large women and the lean to the stout might have affianced her to a man who was not her physical counterpart. Perhaps it was due to good fortune rather than to her merit in selection that Oliver Randall's stalwart and commanding physique comported so admirably with her own tall and well-proportioned figure. This was as it should be; inspiring indeed. She liked to believe that she could not have fallen in love with Oliver Randall unless she had discerned in him an identity of mental and spiritual outlook without which a true mating of souls was an impossibility. Not that they must always agree, not that they would look at everything precisely alike. It was a question of mutual comprehension, of sympathetic affinity concerning the conduct of life, and conspicuously for the moment concerning the marriage relation itself. Her views were Oliver's views; wedlock was a partnership, in which the old-fashioned woman had been too often at a disadvantage; to which the modern woman brought the new charm of intelligent and stimulating companionship.

Then again they were to have the keen pleasure of moulding their own fortunes. As Henry Thornton's wife the problem of ways and means would have been already solved; she would have faced life with a full purse and never have known the fun of contriving economies which would be feathers in the cap of a poor man's wife. Already she and her lover had realized during the exciting process of selecting a house the pleasure of enumerating

on paper sundry stern renunciations to counterbalance the full-fledged risk of agreeing to pay a little more than they could strictly afford for the very thing they were looking for. Not that they were rushing into matrimony headlong. They had less than five thousand dollars between them, but Oliver was the junior partner in an energetic law firm and had every prospect of doing well. They were merely taking a legitimate chance—the chance justified for every healthy and courageous couple who feel that individual joy and capacity would be quadrupled by co-operation. They would be all in all to each other, and would share the delightful perplexities of trying to get ahead in the world.

Mary counted too on earning her own pin-money, as soon as she had put her house in order. Two of her studies in interior decoration had won money prizes and been highly commended in the *Benham Architectural Journal*. She had served a novitiate of three years as a student at the Benham Art Museum both because her tastes led in that direction and because she believed in having a calling to fall back on, though she had always intended to marry. Mary Arnold realized that her talent combined imaginative treatment with a practical inventiveness, so that her designs possessed the double merit of beauty and utility. In the course of indulging a fondness for going over buildings in process of erection she had succeeded more than once in convincing the builders of blocks of houses, who would have listened coldly to strictures based on homeliness, that the internal arrangements were ludicrously inconvenient for the future tenants; and an interesting point was that what she suggested could almost invariably have been accomplished at the outset without the expenditure of an extra dollar. This had set her thinking. If men could be so stupid about what concerned them vitally, why

should not women design the inside of houses? They would be much more likely to know what conveniences other women require. Did not this hold out the key to a new profession for women? She had always said that if it had been necessary for her to earn her own living she would have chosen architecture. And evidently this was the branch of architecture for which she was best equipped.

But seeing that her parents, though not rich, were able to keep her at home until it appeared whether she was likely to marry, she had given a decided preference to the hope of matrimony in forecasting her own future. In fact, she had taken it for granted, so far as a modest maiden may assume, that the right man was certain to come along. It would be time enough to launch out for herself when she was thirty. Being only twenty-six at the moment when her heart told her unmistakably that here was the man she had been waiting for, it was an odd and flattering coincidence that only a few days before Oliver Randall had asked her to be his wife one of the builders whose plans she had criticised should have invited her to try her hand at drawings for a new block of apartments that he was about to erect. She was too preoccupied—her brain was in too ecstatic a whirl to think of such a thing. She had declined, but the episode had provided her with a gleeful opportunity to say to her sweetheart: "You asked me just in time. You see I'm in demand and could have my own profession if I chose."

So far as Mary Arnold could discern there was nothing more formidable than fleecy clouds on the prospect of her approaching union with the man of her choice. Presumably each would discover that the other had faults; but were not unity of outlook and of aspiration the best guarantees of happiness? Among the secon-

dary sources of her satisfaction was the element of comparison afforded by the delightful circumstance that she and her closest friend, Barbara Day—whose bridesmaid she had recently been—were beginning married life within a year of each other. Barbara Day, now Barbara Ford, was one of the dearest of girls and, moreover, one of great talent. There was no question that Barbara had a genuine poetic gift. No less than a dozen of her poems had appeared in the magazines, and her first volume of verse was about to be produced by a leading publisher at his own request.

Mary had not believed that intimacy with a man Barbara had known all her life would result in romance, and she could not help feeling that her friend had rather thrown herself away. Not that Hamilton Ford would fall short in devotion as a husband. No one could help liking him, for he had a cheery sense of humor, and the effect of his drolleries was heightened by his round face and slow enunciation. The position he held down-town was that of clerk in a trust company on a modest salary; all very well, if this was on the road to advancement. But Mary had the impression that he had found his niche—the place commensurate with his abilities, which appeared to include trustworthiness and a talent for matter-of-fact minor details. It was questionable if he would receive promotion for many years to come.

Here was a man who in respect to brains was obviously his wife's inferior. Hamilton Ford would be the first to acknowledge this. The paramount consideration which worried Mary was what would be the effect of matrimony on Barbara's literary development. It was imperative that she should have her artistic opportunity; yet how was she to get it? The only hope of living suitably on their income lay in her performance of the

domestic routine. Would not her creative career be nipped in the bud as a consequence? It must needs be seriously hampered or else the Ford establishment would be at sixes and sevens—a deplorable alternative, Mary thought, for she intended her own housekeeping to be a model of domestic efficiency.

Was it not deplorable that a brilliant woman's future should be sacrificed to petty household duties which any ordinary person could perform? It was from this point of view that she felt a trifle disappointed in Barbara, dearly as she loved her, and bore a bit of a grudge toward the man who had placed her in the position where this was possible. For Barbara, through her very ignorance of domestic economy, was incapable of protecting herself. She might easily become a slave to drudgeries from lack of knowledge of how to escape them and the inability to distinguish between what was and was not vital to domestic comfort. In making comparisons, as was but natural, between themselves and the Fords, it seemed to Mary that she and Oliver had a distinct advantage in her own equipment. The taunt that American girls come to their husbands supremely ignorant of how to boil an egg or dust a room was not applicable to her. She had been blessed with a mother intelligent enough to realize the disastrous effects of such a policy; a mother who had given her much freedom and yet taught her proficiency in the rudiments of housekeeping. To supplement this empirical knowledge she had availed herself of the modern antidote against incompatibility between husband and wife by a thorough course in the laboratory of the Benham School of Domestic Science—her own suggestion, but met by her mother's approval. Here she had learned the basic data concerning food values and the science of domestic economy. So thoroughly

had the underlying principles of household efficiency been imparted to her and fixed by object-lessons where her own brains and her own hands were responsible for the results, that she felt no tremors on the score of stepping into a kitchen of her own. Indeed—cherishing the hope that Oliver, in spite of his faith in her, would open his eyes a little at her aptness—she was eager to begin. They were to have one maid at the start—Oliver could afford this—but she was no less competent to officiate than to direct, whenever the necessity should arise.

Yes, in the house which her fancy pictured there should be modern methods, which would reduce, so she believed, the friction of material things to a minimum. She knew exactly what it ought to cost to nourish suitably any given number of persons and the nutritive quality of almost every article of food. Her training had strengthened rather than diminished two former convictions—that nearly every one eats too much and that the energy of the average woman is frittered away on needless tasks; needless because women had refrained from exercising their wits so as to do without them. By lopping off various domestic superfluities, the origin of which had been either self-indulgence or false notions of utility which had outlived their day, she would prevent her own or her husband's time from being squandered on non-essentials. Their home should not be cluttered with useless articles; they would habitually do without enervating creature comforts and rise from the table hungry, thus keeping their minds clear and their bodies lithe. Far from being ascetic—so Mary reasoned—she intended their lives to be rich in modern activities and experience. She would cook appetizing things on a blazer when they returned after a delightful evening at the theatre. Her theory in lessening the hold of material things was to

afford leisure for the others—for mental stimulus and refreshments; to enable Oliver and her to keep track of what the rest of the world was doing and thinking. She would read aloud to him the latest books, they would frequent the art galleries together, they would listen to the best music, and not a week should pass in which she would fail to secure a few precious hours for her architectural work, especially as she had a fancy to extend her studies in domestic interiors so as to include decoration.

The details of this prospective programme would, of course, have to be worked out gradually, as the different problems presented themselves for solution. She was not so unsophisticated as to imagine that it might not require some modification after she became a wife. It was her own programme in that she had put her mental picture into words, but she had Oliver's approval—certainly his tacit approval of all of it. He had not uttered an objection and was constantly laying stress on the similarity of their tastes. He had told her that from the point of view of physical endowment she was his ideal of what a woman ought to be; that the elasticity and staying powers which fitted her to be his companion in out-of-door pastimes, and in enjoyment of the beauties of nature, had been acquired without the sacrifice (so he said) of a single feminine charm.

This was just the compliment she had been yearning for. She had never striven to be athletic in the modern sense; she was not especially skilful in any game. But she had ever been partial, when the occasion offered, to long tramps through the woods, to canoeing and mountain climbing, as if (she now liked to believe) dreamily conscious that she was thus fitting herself for the great adventure. Oliver had told her that men did not really admire overathletic girls—that a reaction was

due against them. While rejoicing that she was not in this class, she was fain to rejoice also in her own vigor and suppleness and to realize that the high tide of life racing in her veins opened to her channels of initiative hidden from those who were less hardy. Nor was it a question of perspective solely, but of temperature as well. The fulness of life which she was aiming at presupposed the absence of lukewarm or half-hearted tendencies. The subjective cast of mind which had imprisoned within a quagmire of paralyzing doubts the finest souls of the older generation had given place to the perception that to get the most out of existence one must live intensely in a workaday world. Not to dream but to accomplish practical results on the wings of the spirit with the material at one's command—herein lay the modern gospel for high or low. And now it seemed to her that this intensity of being—the oil in the lamp of her aspiring maidenhood—had been so quickened by this strange beckoning of sex that it soared like a flame, and she was impatient for the day when she could attest her fealty to God by her own interpretation of nature's ancient yet ever-new marvel of the fusing of two souls and bodies for the regeneration of both.

They had been engaged for three months, and she was to be married in another fortnight. Though she walked on tiptoe, it was not so easy to let herself go in the bosom of her family or even to Barbara, behind whose mask of sympathy Mary felt she could detect a stifled longing to discuss the price of eggs. But in her letters to Sybil Fielding—Sybil, whose father was an artist and who had lived in Europe for the last dozen years, though they had been schoolmates when children—she had found a medium for expression. In the earlier ones she had the further excuse for ecstasy that she was glad to

let Sybil see how overwhelmingly a girl, who might be said to be exacting on the score of husbands, could fall in love. For during the single visit which Sybil had made to her native country some five years earlier—she had left the impression that her attitude toward the other sex was already that of coy helplessness. Sybil at that time was pretty, sixteen and shy—evidently the type of girl who would eventually angle for a lover in order to be taken care of and, if she secured a husband, would be more than likely to submit to shabby treatment. What a pity! had been Mary's mental comment, though she noticed that some of the boys appeared to be entranced by the drooping lids and inarticulate coquetry of the visitor. It looked as if Sybil had accepted what was still, in spite of the Ibsen School, the conventional continental theory of the relation between the sexes. Yet Barbara Day had credited the visitor with an artistic temperament—had said she was interesting. This assertion had been rather a perplexing bone of contention at the time; Sybil, though able, to be sure, to speak three languages, could neither draw nor paint.

The friends continued their correspondence, and after a while it had dawned on Mary that Barbara had been correct. Sybil's letters showed unmistakably that she was waking up. Her point of view regarding her environment—scenery, galleries, human beings—had become lively and suggestive. Her reflections revealed a dreamy quality, which was almost an aroma, as if the writer had suddenly realized the earth to be a luscious place and was disposed to rejoice in her discovery. Now it was a moonlit monastery, now a Venetian palace, now a luncheon under a vine-clad pergola which inspired her enthusiasm. Before long there was the hint—later the specification—of adventures, romantic,

even furtive, passages with monsieur, herr, or signor, which piqued Mary's curiosity, but had thus far ended in nothing definite. Mary had no reason to think that Sybil had ever been actually engaged; yet she had the manner, on paper at least, of one palpitantly on the lookout for the right man and ready to endow him with fabulous traits. Far from questioning longer that Sybil had temperament, Mary was even inclined to wonder whether, under the spell of the Latin taste for pleasure, she were not becoming a bit of a Bohemian. Certainly it was due to her letters that the tie of childhood, which had seemed on the point of breaking through inanition, had become a flexible bond of friendship; and flexibility could afford to make allowances. As a consequence of the early death of Sybil's mother, her life with her artist father had been socially nomadic and free from restraints. It was not unnatural, therefore, that her adventures should be a little out of the common. But for this very reason it seemed all the more strange that her attitude toward the other sex should have remained so stable. Yet one could read between the lines of every epistle that Sybil continued to be an idolatress; that she still persisted in regarding men as demigods, to be ensnared and then humored or placated, instead of far from faultless mortals whom it was woman's privilege after proper devotion on their part to fall over head and ears in love with and thereby inspire—a cardinal distinction which went to the very roots of social progress.

In her first letter to Sybil after her engagement to Oliver Mary had pitched the expression of her emotions high. She desired Sybil to realize that her exaltation was not a whit less ardent than if it were based on blind and cringing hero-worship. She could not imagine—so she wrote—that any woman could be happier. But, having demonstrated this and received an appropriate reply, she

was glad of the chance, now that she was writing on the eve of becoming a wife, to draw aside the curtain which veiled the chamber of her matrimonial anticipations and afford her friend an enlightening glimpse of the well-adjusted contents.

"It never occurred," so she wrote, "to the old-fashioned girl to remember that any one had ever been married before and that in becoming a bride she was not taking part in a highly original ceremony, which made her the centre of the universe as an enviable monopolist. If the growing habit of using our own faculties has robbed us moderns of this charming delusion, it has provided a glorious substitute. Why am I the happiest girl alive, Sybil, dearest? Not because I'm possessed by the conviction of being the only woman who ever loved or was loved. As a frivolous pen might state, there are others. It's because I'm brimming over with the hope that our experiment—Oliver's and mine, mine and Oliver's—will be something different—richer, more ennobling to us both and on a higher plane of service and comradeship than the world has hitherto seen. And the crowning hope is that we ought not to fail. The marriages likely to fail are those in which the contracting parties (as the newspapers call them) will be satisfied if their lot resembles former happy lots and who look for nothing better. Such an attitude would never suit Oliver and me. Do you ask why? For the reason that both of us—he no less profoundly than I—seek to be more to each other than it has been possible for previous lovers to be; more to each other because we recognize that in the world of humanity, which never stands still, the swiftly changing attitude of woman toward man and man toward woman has bred new opportunities and responsibilities. If woman demands more, it is because she yearns to bestow more. If man

begrudges less, it is because he feels that his wife has ceased to be a parasitic reflection of himself and become in the true sense a mate. If you comprehend what I have in mind, Sybil *mia*—and you will if you heed the undercurrents over there as well as here—you will see that the working out of this interpretation adds a fresh zest to matrimony and opens an enlarged horizon of happiness to every new pair of blissful lovers. . . .

“You ask what he is like. Surely I wrote you. Large and stalwart-looking; not too much taller than I. A slightly curly head of light-brown hair, honest gray eyes, and a forcible nose, the prominence of which is relieved by his ingratiating smile, though he can set his lips and look stern if the occasion warrants. What Oliver says may not be highly original, but it sounds so; for he enunciates clearly and confidently, which explains why he won prizes for declamation at school and college. And what does he do? He is one of the army of lawyers; a necessary and (Oliver tells me) a noble profession, though it always seems so dry and sometimes petty. Our daily bread—and presently a few comforts, we hope—will be derived from the law. He has lately been admitted into a firm as the junior partner, but that is only temporary, as he will set up for himself presently, and he has a fancy for politics. But I care much more for what he is than for what he does, though I expect him to be famous some day, of course. We were taken to the theatre night before last by another of the partners and his wife, who was a mush. The wife, I mean; one of those women who never weary of prostrating themselves in public before men, especially their own husbands. She told me that she lay awake nights thinking out devices for pleasing hers (as if she were afraid he would weary of her), and she asked me if I did not consider Oliver nearly per-

fect. I shocked her by telling her no. But lest I shock you, romantic one, I will go so far (in confidence) as to admit not merely that his virtues outnumber his peccadilloes, but that I expect before we have been married six months the latter (and mine into the bargain) will have vanished altogether. After which bit of extravagance, I kiss you good night. Your devoted Mary."

CHAPTER II

AND so they were married. With Benham, in which Mary Arnold and Oliver Randall set up housekeeping, some of you are already familiar. For more than a decade after its mushroom-like development, owing to the discovery of oil-wells in its vicinity shortly subsequent to the Civil War, it might have been described as a Western city with an Eastern exposure. But the shifting centre of national population long ago made Eastern city with a Western exposure more appropriate, and in the interval its own population doubled and then quintupled, while on its constantly widening area various forms of industrial enterprise—rolling-mills, pork packing-houses, and car-shops—arose in the wake of the oil discoveries; so that at the time of Mary Arnold's marriage Benham had ceased to be an upstart community of sprawling and boastful tendencies, and was to be ranked with the sober, important cities of the country; a city still spreading and vibrant with energy, but dignified in its manifestations of progress; a city closely resembling the others in its adherence to national types and customs, yet with local color which was a legitimate source of pride and seemed to its inhabitants to distinguish it from the rest. Benham already had a past; a past to be regarded with complacency; yet complacency tempered by the insight which comes with spiritual growth. Benham had made mistakes, but its errors in transit—some not yet wholly eradicated—could be laid at the door of noble democratic impulses.

Its evolution has been marked by certain definite stages. First the early days of frenzied building operations measured by leaps and bounds; fifteen years of self-satisfaction so exuberant that the nose of criticism dared not show itself on the streets lest it be tweaked; years when all were so absorbed in money-making that there was no time to observe defects, much less to remedy them, and the pioneers in golden opportunities grew so habituated to makeshifts that they jeered at the notion of discarding the river Nye as drinking water long after it became a receptacle for all the industrial refuse of the city.

Indeed, up to the time when the census takers figured the population at one hundred and fifty thousand, the voice of criticism in Benham, if it rose above a whisper, fell on deaf ears. Like most other growing communities in our wide domain, Benham was seething with the doctrine that every American is the equal of his neighbor, and that the talents of every citizen are sufficient for any opportunity. Hence it saw nothing incongruous in choosing the hog reeve of one administration as the school committee man of the next, and in intrusting elaborate architectural design to a mason or a plumber who under the Constitution, forsooth, was eligible to be President of the United States. The specialist in every calling was looked at askance as one trying to discredit an honest man's handiwork which was good enough for Benham. And if for Benham, why not for the civilized world, especially for effete Europe?

This phase, though tenacious of its prerogatives, proved transitory. There are septuagenarians alive who can recall the fierce struggle in committee which culminated in the selection of a New York architect in preference to a local builder to prepare the plans for what is now regarded as one of Benham's most beau-

tiful churches. The opponents of custom-made architecture triumphed by a narrow but decisive majority, and at about the same date local sentiment concerning the innocuousness of sewage received such a corrective from an epidemic of typhoid fever that the Nye was discarded as a source of water-supply in favor of more isolated reservoirs.

The winding Nye, which almost doubles upon itself in the course of its passage, may truly be termed the main artery of Benham's civic destiny. On one side are the older manufactories and business offices. In their rear are the shops, which kept encroaching on the residential quarter until Central Avenue, at first the abode of fashion, was given over to mammoth clothing establishments and department stores, and the leading citizens retired to the so-called River Drive remote from turmoil and barter. On the other, the northerly side, are the newer and larger manufacturing plants, and still beyond, where the Nye makes a short loop, lies Poland, the district occupied by the foreign races who furnish the raw and some of the skilled labor required by the factories. A single wooden bridge formerly provided transport at this point. Now the river is spanned by seven bridges of iron, for the manufacturers, cramped for space, have invaded the opposite bank and pushed the proletariat into territory which once was pastureland. Here, where the cattle grazed within the memory of men still middle-aged, are Benham's slums and college settlements, for in the winnowing processes of competitive existence not a few have risen to the top, and many more, notwithstanding equal opportunity, have sunk so perilously near the bottom as to be in need of the charity—a judicious blending of good advice with cash—proffered by the most enlightened souls in the community.

Discarding her pioneer instincts, Benham prides herself to-day on being the most progressive city in the nation because of her faith in specialists and the earnestness of her desire to grow greater and more beautiful under the guidance of genius, regardless of expense. But the pathway toward that goal is marked by chastening reminders. The feudal castle turreted in rough stone, erected on the River Drive by Joel Flagg, Benham's miller until he became her first oil magnate, and the painful soldiers' monument surmounted by a manikin with a musket belong to the first period of her civic prosperity; but sundry later monstrosities attest that imported talent given the freest scope is not invariably happy in its magnificent experiments. Yet surveying the past chronologically, from the period of the metal stag as a lawn ornament to that of the pergola and the sun-dial, one may well marvel at a progress so striking and so swift. Indeed at the date when this story begins all the arts had, figuratively speaking, not merely cut their teeth, but were able to stand alone, which is another way of stating that Benham had become cosmopolitan in its outlook though loyal to native traditions.

Such a claim should perhaps be justified a little more explicitly. To begin with, the population numbers four hundred thousand, one-quarter of foreign extraction, so that one can hear strange tongues merely by stepping out-of-doors. On the other hand, Benham's magnates and school-teachers visit Europe in droves every summer. For monuments to the humanities one has merely to instance Wetmore College, open to both sexes, founded by the late Joel Flagg in memory of his mother, Sarah Wetmore, the richly endowed Silas K. Parsons General Hospital, and the Benham Art Museum and the Benham Free Public Library, established chiefly through

the munificence of other wealthy citizens. Besides numerous brand-new church edifices, each aspiring to be artistically individual, the public buildings include schoolhouses deservedly termed model, an industrial trade-school, and the school of domestic science where Mary Arnold learned food values; also seven theatres, besides the projected opera-house, and an equal number of newspapers each with a Sunday magazine department and an editor on social etiquette qualified to answer with cosmopolitan fluency such pertinent inquiries as "should a lady in walking take a gentleman's arm or he hers?" It was the *Benham Sentinel* which made the reply "either is correct," and thus not merely gave new heart to the democratic practise of grasping the back of the lady's arm and shoving or trundling her along the street, but vindicated anew Benham's reluctance to be bound by what London or Paris, New York or Boston does or thinks. For, though so far humble-minded as to recognize that truth is apt to emanate from these centres, Benham still continues to cherish the conviction of being able to interpret in a little fuller and finer sense everything on which the older exponents of civilization have set the seal of approval.

Expressed in slightly different metaphor, one of Benham's chief titles to serious consideration is that her face is perpetually turned toward the morning; that she not merely welcomes and is quick to grasp new ideas, but is able to improve on them. It would be erroneous to assume that the enlightened circles of Benham are not familiar with what is being discussed by the most advanced minds in the universe. On the contrary, those belonging to them read the reviews of the latest books as soon as they appear (and not infrequently the books themselves) and keep abreast of the successive waves of thought by which society is

agitated. If it be true that the Benhamites (whatever they may imagine) are not peculiar in this, and that Benham is but typical of every self-respecting city in the United States, to what moving cause may this progressive attitude be ascribed if not to the suppleness of the American woman?

Is there a man vain or ungrateful enough to question that the laurels belong almost exclusively to her? Democracy and the modern woman! What contemporary theme compares in interest with this? Yet one of the most salient characteristics of the modern woman is her mobility; she never stands still, but is always progressing. In a nation—one might write a world—so alert as this, her point of view becomes old-fashioned almost as quickly as her clothes. Benham's evolution is dotted with memories of various interesting feminine personalities, among whom, as some of you will recall, was Selma White (her maiden name, for she was married thrice through force of circumstances), a woman who looked like a worried archangel and cherished a sincere, well-founded faith in the destinies of her sex and the republic; one, however, whose capacity for usefulness was impaired by the tendency of her righteousness to run amuck with the unconscious envy inspired in her by those whose mental and social equipment was superior to her own. She was rampant in the earlier days of the woman's clubs when the serious energies of those present were devoted to local essays interpretative of the masterpieces of literature, to elocutionary efforts such as "Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight" and "O Why Should the Spirit of Mortal Be Proud," and to musical exercises which embraced melodious whistling.

What a change in these gatherings a quarter of a century has wrought! Not merely has the ubiquitous

yearning for this form of æsthetic culture been superseded by a practical impulse, almost a crusade, toward public service—municipal tree planting and sanitation, the furtherance of pure-food bills and the like—but the development of the American woman at large on her social side has been no less striking. You will remember that Selma regarded with constant suspicion, as un-American and subversive of national ideals, those engaging niceties of deportment, dress, and point of view which distinguished certain women with whom she was brought in contact. As has been intimated, she was simply envious without knowing it. To-day there is no one more “dressy,” as she would say, than Selma; more ambitious to shine socially by aid of the ingratiating arts. She is no longer young, to be sure—fifty at least; and, as her establishment is comparatively modest, would still be apt to characterize those whom she would like to know, but does not, as “given over to a life of personal indulgence.” It was after her return from Spain, where as the wife of the American minister, James O. Lyons, Selma aspired to put an end to bull-fights, that she found herself yielding to the wave of social sophistication engulfing American womanhood. What she does not know to-day about timely topic classes, auction-bridge luncheons, and all the other modern amenities would not be found in any handbook of social etiquette. She entertains extensively in her own set; she has her automobile, and connives with her chauffeur to break the speed-limit laws when unobserved.

So rapidly do our conditions change that the type of woman which Selma in her heyday represented is becoming obsolete in that it is much more difficult to detect her. Indeed, were the double of her youthful self—wearing the same expression of worried archangel

and the same chip on her shoulder—to stalk into Selma's presence to-day, she would fail to recognize the likeness and would be apt, as one of the charter members of the Woman's Club, the successor of the Benham Institute, to blackball the applicant for membership on the score of crudity and lack of social suppleness. Benham has the right to feel proud of its new generation of young women, if for no other reasons, because of their tolerance of points of view unfamiliar to them and their abhorrence of superficiality—characteristics which indicate a desire to pierce to the root of things. "You bring to your husband," wrote the Reverend Percy Starr (the present rector of the church already alluded to, which stands as the first monument of Benham's protest against custom-made architecture) in his letter written to his favorite parishioner, Mary Arnold, shortly before her wedding, "two qualities which your predecessors in holy matrimony have not possessed because of the very limitations of their outlook. I mean the ability to discuss any question on level terms of comradeship and an all-round efficiency in putting your conclusion into actual effect. By the removal of the scales from woman's eyes and the fetters which clogged her energies, a glorious impetus has been given toward a truer rendering of the solemn scripture words 'And they twain shall become one flesh.' "

The house in which the Randalls set up housekeeping was in the general neighborhood of the River Drive, but in territory so far away from it as to be still an outlying region where land was cheap and fashion had not penetrated. Yet their selection had been made on the theory that the city would inevitably spread in their direction—a westerly one; this would mean that some day—ten or fifteen years hence at the furthest—their semicolonial villa with its plot of land large enough

both for flower-beds and a lawn-tennis court would have increased in value and they would find themselves in with the best social activities of the city. It pleased Mary that she had been the one to emphasize the advantages of this location. It pleased her too that she had been the one to contrive that there should be room for the flower-beds and the possibilities of a tennis court without falling over backward into the hedge which separated them from their neighbors. Flowers they must have; both were agreed on this. But the necessity of securing a plot of their own on which to build a tennis court impressed itself upon her before it was too late to tell the builder to alter his plans; and Mary found the satisfaction of realizing the advantage of the tennis court. The expense of the court would be trifling. Oliver was ready to keep the grass short; or if he was not, so, she would. It did not matter that the court would not be perfect for, much as they would enjoy the exercise, it was merely a means to an end.

Mary felt that she had passed safely through the ordeal of the marriage. Sundry warnings had put her on her guard, but she was expecting it to be unalloyed bliss. But whatever surprise or dismay experienced had been merged in the joy of being a wife in every sense, with the result that she had not ceased wondering if any one had ever been so happy. Oliver had satisfied her ideal of a husband and she had given herself up to the rapture of being in the sunlight of his devotion.

Yet, despite the joys of the honeymoon she was glad it was over. Glad because domestic life with the lover of one's choice seemed even more like fairy-land. Her house was all it should be, both within and without. She had kept the mechanics up to the mark and were

no loose ends to mar the snugness of their home-coming. The flues, the kitchen range, and the electric bells—she had tested them all—were in working order. She had cooked Oliver's first meal with her own hands—thereby affording the maid an object-lesson in household efficiency. He had almost "licked the platter," but two helpings were enough for anybody. Now that the furniture was in she was more than ever content with the interior, which seemed exactly suited to their requirements. The well-proportioned, pretty and not too ambitious trio of rooms on the ground floor, comprising a dining-room, spacious parlor, which was half drawing-room, half library, and a den for Oliver, had been furnished by her with an eye to facility in cleaning and dusting. While aiming at artistic effects, she had consigned to a closet in the garret such of their wedding presents as were mere ornamental litter. The new fashion of pervasive white paint would be in itself a stimulus to light heartedness. One of her ambitions was to maintain the thermometer in the living-rooms consistently at 68. She had found there was plenty to do; her fingers and generally her wits had been kept enchantingly busy. And yet she had managed to find a little leisure every day for her hobby—her architectural design work.

Of course a new broom sweeps clean. Mary thoroughly realized this. It was not to be expected that everything would continue to shape itself exactly as she would prefer. But it was well to cherish standards and endeavor to live up to them; especially if one were level-headed enough to be able to smile at them occasionally. For instance, she had furnished the living-room with two writing-tables in the expectation that Oliver and she in the evenings after they had finished reading aloud would work in proximity. Oliver's pipe had proved an obstacle to the establishment of this

habit, both because it went without saying that he must feel free to smoke a pipe if he insisted and because when, by way of smiling at this standard, she had offered to let him smoke in the living-room, it became obvious after a single experiment that he very much preferred the den. She was disappointed; but had not the lack of just the pliancy which enabled her to accept the situation with good humor imperilled the happiness of many a married woman in the past? The situation had its redeeming side in that the experience of two months of married life had demonstrated Oliver to be more disorderly than she. He preferred to keep his desk in confusion, his books and papers tossed about; a condition of affairs which would mar the appearance of what was partially a drawing-room. Besides he had random visitors—men who dropped in without warning to see him about politics when it was almost time to go to bed. This meant additional tobacco and not infrequently bottles of beer.

No, to attempt to interfere with Oliver's pipe or cigars would be the height of imprudence; but Mary was harboring the hope that he would gradually wean himself of the habit; so gradually that he would never suspect that he had not given it up of his own accord. There was Hamilton Ford, for example; he never touched tobacco. And yet, according to every one, he was a good fellow, a man's man. After all, was not smoking one of the non-essentials; a self-indulgent and hence socially baneful practice? Oliver should smoke unmolested if he desired; but she was sure he would be better off without tobacco.

She had reached this conclusion very shortly after their honeymoon; but it happened to be in her mind in consequence of snuffing the atmosphere of the den—where she had been trying to tidy up so cleverly that

her husband would never realize that anything had been touched—when looking out of the window she spied him in the distance. Mary flew out across the lawn to meet him. His face lighted joyfully at her approach. Having embraced her, he suffered her to take possession of two medium-sized packages which were wedged under one arm and then proceeded to fumble in his pocket for another.

“Now bear witness, Ollie, this is the first time I’ve really broken the commandment: Thou shalt not constitute thy husband an expressman. One of the things was ordered and didn’t come, the other I stupidly forgot, and so——”

“I like it; it labels me,” he interrupted benignantly. “Some good Samaritan who saw me may have said to himself: ‘That fellow has a family now and will work cheap. I’ll give him my law business.’”

“I hope he will. But I wished you to realize it was an accident; and please take notice the things arrived at your office; you didn’t have to go for them.”

“At the huge expense of three telephone calls.”

“I hoped you wouldn’t think of that.” She put her arm through his and danced along at his side. There was a big-limbed solidity about Oliver which almost suggested sluggishness in comparison with her own nervous agility. Not that he could not be expeditious and energetic when roused; but his ordinary movements were leisurely. In a mood of affectionate banter she had more than once told him that he was the human counterpart of a mastiff, so large, good-tempered, trustworthy, and deliberate was he. “Speaking of families, I called to-day at the Fords’. The baby is ailing and Barbara has her hands full. Just at the time, too, when the magazines are begging for contributions because of the success of her volume of poems. She has partly

finished a play and she has a novel in mind. Of course Barbara has dropped everything and is devoting herself to the infant. It's teeth, I believe."

"I should hope so."

"Now don't misunderstand me, Ollie, dearest, and jump to the conclusion that Barbara is deficient in maternal instinct. She's just crazy about the baby; talks and thinks of nothing else. It's a dear little thing. She asked me with tears in her eyes if I believed it were going to die, and I reassured her by saying that I thought the mite looked tolerably rugged. The point is Barbara has a touch of genius. All the critics who have read her verses are agreed on this. And how will she find time for productive literary work if she has to look after four or five babies in straitened circumstances?"

Oliver laughed. "Don't overwork your imagination, darling, by worrying over the Fords' future. She'll manage somehow. If it comes to a larger family than she can handle, there are always people on the lookout to adopt children."

"There you go missing the point entirely. Barbara would sooner cut off her right hand and never write another line than part with one of them. But Hamilton Ford's just the man to allow her to have them in quick succession."

"Ham's all right. She's the apple of his eye, just as you are of mine." And with the word, as they were at the front door, Oliver lifted her over the threshold with a sweep of his arm and gave her a fond kiss. "But I don't see that I can very well consent to be a committee of one to regulate the size of his family."

"Perhaps not. She fully expects to combine the two things, and for the time being perhaps she can; but I hate to see her wasted on housekeeping."

Oliver, who was hanging up his overcoat, turned, at-

tracted by the last sentence. "If she has real talent, I suppose it *is* rather a waste." Musing a moment, he added, "but she chose to get married."

"Oh, yes, she's in for it and I'm trying to see the way out. The way to enable her to make the most of the gift nature has given her, poor dear. They got married and will stay married, for they're turtle-doves; that's perfectly evident."

"They'll work it out somehow." He was fumbling in his breast pocket as he spoke. "Put yourself in her place; you'd find a way out."

The personal application was evidently new to Mary, for she paused an instant before replying: "It might be a puzzle, but one ought to find some expedient to prevent the stifling of the divine fire. There's this difference, though, between Barbara and me—she labors under the disadvantage of lacking my modern equipment. She knows nothing whatsoever of domestic science and her only interest in it is the horribly practical one that Hamilton and the baby must be housed and fed."

"Here are hands across the sea from another of your friends." He said, holding out a letter.

"From Sybil Fielding!" she cried, glancing at the writing. Opening it, Mary presently uttered an exclamation of surprise and looked up for Oliver, but he had disappeared. The news was so absorbing that she stepped into the parlor to complete her perusal. When Oliver reappeared it was from the lower regions, bearing a plate heaped with some of the contents of her larder.

Eager as Mary was to impart to him what she had just read, she frowned involuntarily; Oliver had been foraging again, thus converting a previous occurrence which might have been an accident into a propensity.

The remembrance was still fresh of their return after listening to Wagner, when her soul was so steeped in emotion that she could scarcely refrain from throwing her arms around Oliver's neck the moment they entered the house. It was close on midnight; she had suddenly missed him, and after what seemed an unconscionable interval he had brought back from below everything edible in the house—the half of a chicken, the remains of a ham (intended to last some time), bread and butter, and three bottles of beer.

“Why, Ollie,” she had cried, “it never occurred to me that you were hungry! Why didn't you tell me so that I might cook you a Welsh rabbit or scramble some eggs?”

He had simply beamed at her, showing not merely that he entertained no grievance on this score, but was more than pleased with the fruits of his marauding. And how voraciously he had attacked them! As if he had not tasted food for an age. She had eaten a little to please him; but his performance and the gusto of it seemed to her to savor of what he himself playfully termed—an orgy. And by the time he had finished, he was prodigiously sleepy and totally disinclined to rhapsodize about the opera. And now at this strange time of day—when the slice of apple pie and the chunk of cheese which he had purloined would spoil his dinner—he was at it again. Not that she begrudged him food if he were really hungry; but weren't men queer?

“Oliver, I've something interesting to tell you.”

He was munching contentedly, headed for the den. Mary's voice was a trifle grave, for her news was sad. Though the summons which arrested him contained no hint of criticism, some consciousness of guilt—or at least of the need of apology—drew from him, despite his care-free demeanor: “I was so busy to-day that I

didn't have time for a bite of luncheon, and I'm nearly starved."

"You poor dear! Are you sure you have plenty?" Mary's mental animadversions were dissipated by a wave of sympathy. "But if you go all day without eating, you are sure to break down."

Oliver nodded. He was just finishing the last bit of pie. "When a fellow is trying to get ahead it isn't always easy not to forget to eat. What's your news, Mary?"

"Sybil Fielding's father has died suddenly; and she's coming home."

Oliver expressed suitable concern. "His death will be a blow to Sybil. But you'll be the gainer. She's the one of your close friends whom I know only by hearsay."

"She's a dear in her way. From what she intimates I fear her father has left next to nothing. She wishes to find something to do."

"That ought not to be difficult; for she must be a dab at languages."

"She speaks them, of course." Mary was silent a moment, then she added: "Now that Sybil is coming home there may be some chance of her marrying. Up to this time her attractions have been wasted on romantic episodes with foreigners whom she fascinated, but who had no serious intentions."

CHAPTER III

IN marrying Mary Arnold, Oliver Randall recognized that he had succeeded beyond his deserts. Her acceptance of him was the piece of good fortune which had seemed beyond his reach, for the reason that he was not good enough for her. Since early youth Oliver had maintained toward the other sex—toward his future wife as he imagined her—an attitude of reverence. Every woman stood for him on more or less of a pedestal. But on his return from college to his native city, Benham, he found himself making discriminations with the result that he became addicted to lively banter with the average nice girls he met, whom, he subconsciously excluded from the category of possible wives, but he continued to worship from afar a certain other type which seemed to answer to his aspirations. In other words, he had sloughed off his youthful shyness, but retained his ideality.

His first meeting with Mary, his clumsy and deliberately sober efforts to pass muster with her, his incipient gratitude at her detection of some kernel of worth beneath the rind of his social muteness and his alternating despair at his inability to shine in such company, and finally his ecstatic wonder that this entrancing being and he were becoming intimate by virtue of his latent enthusiasm for the deep things of life, which he thought he had effectually concealed—here were the successive stages of a courtship which had led to the very goal of which he had dreamed. What was it that she saw in him? How had she been able to discern beneath his

matter-of-fact personality that he was at heart almost the antipodes of the unromantic individual for which he passed? What gift of divination had unearthed for her the delightful discovery that their views on most subjects were identical? All these questions had been set at rest by her surrender, by the thrilling consciousness that this high priestess in the company of everyday girls had become his for the asking.

A factor which had given him heart and supplied him with opportunities of approach had been the wooing of Barbara Day by his familiar friend Ham Ford. Barbara Day Oliver regarded as another priestess the latchet of whose shoes he was not worthy to unloose, and in whose presence he was tongue-tied until he listened to Ham take liberties of audacious speech with her which caused her to bubble over with laughter whenever he opened his mouth. By the time that couple were engaged he himself was on terms of such airy persiflage with Barbara, notwithstanding she was a poetess, as to justify sundry delicate insinuations on her part that he was partial to the society of a very intimate friend of hers—insinuations which Barbara knew how to make with just that tantalizing reserve which left him none the wiser as to his prospects. But if a thoroughly amiable and entertaining, but rather unenterprising and unambitious fellow like Ham was able to win by sheer force of pleasantry a sweet, refined being, whose talents approached genius, why need he despair utterly of success with her who represented his ideal of loveliness and feminine efficiency?

Not that he set his own attainments relatively high. It was only by way of comparison with Ham, who, though worthy, was obviously not brilliant. Like many of us, Oliver was conscious of two selves: the one his ordinary ostensible self; the other his secret self, pre-

ciously cherished but kept in the background, lest it evoke derision, yet ever and anon lending an indulgent ear to lures of glory which stopped not short of high renown, vast wealth, or the presidency of the United States. This was the self the existence of which his beloved had discovered, to his gratified amazement. When under the spell of the day-dreams which this self encouraged, he had sought from time to time grounds for hoping that he might turn out extraordinary, the only gift—if it were a gift—which seemed to afford a possible basis for this ambition was his ability to say what he had to say so fluently and clearly that his hearers listened. This he had been able to do ever since he could remember; at school, in declamations for prizes, and subsequently at college, where, when he was not too lazy to debate, his performances had attracted attention.

Rather a meagre attainment in view of the lack of positive effort put into it; to be accepted contentedly like any other serviceable quality which nature provides, but no ground for fancying oneself peculiarly endowed. This was certainly the judgment passed by his other self—his every-day commonplace self—which perched on the shoulders of his secret and shrinking twin, overshadowed it to the casual eye and dominated it in ordinary dialogue by means of straightforward, shrewd, and amiable impulses which in the composite are known as common sense. With this self, which took pride in the possession of a hard-headed, modest, and catholic outlook, he passed for what he was ostensibly—the junior partner in the firm of Smallpage, Patterson & Randall, a fledgling attorney lately married and eager to get ahead; one of the rank and file of rising lawyers, if his exploits up to date were the criterion, but on the watch to take advantage of every

opportunity. And for the furtherance of this aim—as this wise mentor went on to point out—it was incumbent on him to live up to his principles, but not to tread on other people's toes; and it was requisite, in order to remain lenient toward their foibles, to avoid flying off at a tangent or cultivating too egoistic tendencies. Why work oneself up to fighting pitch unless a vital issue was at stake? Why lose one's breath and get overheated if the next train would answer just as well?

Prior to his marriage, during the six years which had elapsed since his graduation, he had become one of a coterie of bachelors, men of various callings whom chance and the common interest that they were all starting in life had welded into a congenial group. Besides Hamilton Ford there was Everett Dean connected with the iron business, Walter Price a broker in cereals, Sam Ferguson, who had recently hung out his shingle as a doctor, David Parks a civil engineer, Henry Bailey, also a lawyer; and three or four others more or less affiliated with the same set. A meeting-place for these pals was Oliver's rooms, perhaps because he had lived in bachelor quarters longest, having lost both his parents between his sixteenth and twenty-first years. It was a favorite habit of the group to dine together on Saturday night, visit some theatre, and then repair to Oliver's lodgings for further refreshment and discussion of the affairs of the universe. While his secret self might make distinctions of character and ability, to the eyes of Oliver's every-day self these young men were all equals, engaged when separated in the endeavor to plant both feet firmly on the ground, but collectively united by ties of comradeship, and so overlooking faults or weaknesses and cherishing only the merits of every man's make-up. Any one was at liberty to bring a friend to their gatherings, and one evening

Walter Price introduced George Patterson, five years their senior, an attorney who had already surmounted the lowest rounds of the ladder which leads to success. As a result of this propinquity he and Oliver took so decided a liking to each other (the special medium of magnetism being a recitation by Oliver of "Casey at the Bat") that a year later George Patterson convinced Mr. Smallpage that young Randall was the most desirable legal scavenger in sight to clean up the small business of their office.

Hamilton Ford's marriage had been closely followed by the exodus of David Parks to assume charge of an important engineering undertaking farther west. By the time Oliver announced his own engagement the coterie showed unmistakable signs of disintegration. Yet while he gleefully set fire to the bridge which led from the happy-go-lucky domesticities of bachelorhood into the promised land of wedlock, second thought, in which he was abetted by his wife, prompted him to provide safe passage for the most favored of his friends before all means of communication were cut off. There were some of his cronies with whom he hoped still to keep closely in touch; there were a few of his former avocations which he yearned not wholly to renounce. In the case of Everett Dean, man and avocation were united in the same person. Their friendship, begun at college, had been cemented by a trip abroad, undertaken immediately after graduation so as to obtain a glimpse of the outer world before settling down. It was a trip mostly on foot with knapsacks, for their revenues were slender. Nevertheless, they had covered much ground and modified their preconceptions concerning old-world despotism and degeneracy. Perhaps this bird's-eye view of foreign institutions had been their first stimulus toward interest in public affairs.

At all events, six years of bachelor freedom had inoculated both of them with a taste for local politics. Common sense might dictate that as a family man all his attention should now be centred on his law business; but Oliver had not been married a month before his fingers began to itch to take a hand in respect to voting lists and caucuses. Besides, were there not two sides to the question whether politics were detrimental to a young practitioner of the law? They brought one into contact with no end of people and made one's name familiar through the ward and sometimes the city.

Then there were Walter Price and "Doc" Ferguson, genial fellows both, and neither with a home of his own. While Oliver's rooms could no longer be their chief rendezvous, he wished them to feel free to drop in at his fireside whenever they chose. "Doc" was a pronounced misogynist. Seeing that his clients were still chiefly hospital or charity patients, it was just as well perhaps that he should continue to ignore the existence of the other sex except pathologically until he was a little further ahead. On the contrary, Walter Price, by virtue of sundry shrewd operations in the wheat market, was just at the stage when he might readily become the lawful prey of the first captivating girl who set eyes on him. And if she proved to be one of Mary's friends, so much the better for everybody.

Assuredly, Oliver reflected, he must keep on terms of familiar intercourse with the Pattersons. To begin with, he was dependent on George for the domestic bread and butter. George was a good fellow, an industrious, capable lawyer, and interested in him, and Nettie, his wife, whatever her shortcomings, was certainly one of the kindest of souls. To be sure, looking at her through Mary's spectacles, he could understand Mary's frank criticism of her; Mrs. Patterson did

undoubtedly (to quote Mary's words) make love to her husband most of the time by singing his perfections aloud, and loudest when George was present. Then, too, according to Mary, not content with providing an overbountiful table at all times, she was forever trying to induce her guests to take a second portion or try a dish already refused, with the consequence that only a very firm person could avoid excess. Oliver could not deny that he was likely to return home from the Pattersons conscious of having eaten too much. This had been the case on the evening when he had dined with them just after he and Mary were engaged, and, as luck would have it, he had awakened with a slight indisposition on the morning after dining there subsequent to the honeymoon. Mary was fond of making the point that Nettie Patterson by her old-fashioned methods of overpraising and overfeeding hindered her husband instead of helping him.

The daily programme of Oliver's married life after six months had passed left nothing to be desired. Not only was existence on a higher plane, emancipated from the haphazard and often vacuous distractions which beset a single man, but he found in his association with Mary just that stimulus of which his faculties stood in need. Without being lazy hitherto, he had frequently been aware at the end of the week of a kind of mental indigestion not dissimilar in its symptoms to that experienced from the hospitality of the Pattersons; in other words, that, in spite of crowded days and evenings, he had left undone most of the things which he had intended to accomplish. This happily was at an end. Their common life ran with the regularity and smoothness of a well-constructed mechanism. He sprang out of bed promptly, whether sleepy or not, at the cheery summons of Mary, who was the first to rise. By the

time certain household duties allotted to each (his own share pertained to the furnace and the hose) had been performed the breakfast things were on the table with Mary at the head smiling at him across the blazer on which she was preparing the single dish—eggs, bacon, or kidneys—with which she regaled him. As a bachelor he had been fond of his morning cup—sometimes two cups—of coffee. His wife had persuaded him to try the experiment of doing without it. She explained to him that coffee was a poison, and that all poisons, however seductive, were detrimental to human efficiency. This he was in no position to deny in view of “Doc” Ferguson’s intimation the previous year that the occasional dizziness from which he suffered was due to the second cup. It had been Mary’s own suggestion that he break himself of the propensity gradually by indulging in the beverage only on Sundays and holidays, and she lived up to her share of the compromise by serving it hot and strong.

The arrival of the postman just as they were finishing breakfast gave Mai, the opportunity to look over the mail and call attention before he started for the office to any current exhibition of pictures or other refining attraction. She abetted his desire to allow time enough for walking all the way to his business without hurry and, though a memorandum-pad hung just inside the den to keep him posted as to their social engagements, she was apt to remind him when they were dining out or going to the theatre. Having kissed her, he lighted his cigar in the vestibule, and, as he strode from the door, was agreeably conscious that his head was perfectly clear (whether due to abstention from coffee or not), and that he felt like a fighting-cock, fit for the responsibilities of the day and armed by love against insidious temptations to squander his energies.

In the late afternoon when he left his law office, the knowledge that Mary would be waiting for him spurred him to reach home as soon as possible. Their rendezvous would be on the tennis-court, if daylight or the weather permitted; if not, at some gallery or kindred resort. They were agreed on the importance of trying to keep in fine physical condition. They were agreed too on the desirability from the point of view of a broad life of filling the gaps in Oliver's education, the most obvious of which were on the æsthetic side. He owned to them and deplored that he had not imbibed more of this sort of knowledge while in college. Now, under Mary's tuition, he hoped to be able presently to disguise his ignorance sufficiently to seem to take an intelligent interest in the various matters constantly arising which concerned Benham's artistic development.

It happened that Sybil Fielding was detained in Europe for several months by complications incident to settling her father's estate. There was very little money left, but enough to enable her to look around before seeking an occupation. Her arrival antedated by only a few weeks that of the Randalls' first baby, which prompted Mary to remark: "As I shan't be able to do much for Sybil for a while, I'll persuade her to come and take a family dinner with the Fords. She used to know Barbara and she'll get on with Ham. You might ask an extra man, Oliver; Henry Thornton is out of town."

"'Doc' or Walter?"

"Can you hesitate? 'Doc's' a dear when you know him; but he'd glower at her and say nothing. Walter will do very well. His conversation doesn't amount to much, but he runs on in a lively fashion; and Sybil needs enlivening. She is still very sad. It seems she adored her father."

While he felt no desire for company other than that of his wife, Oliver was not averse to let his friends see how well she looked at the head of his table, what an appetizing yet sensible dinner she could provide, and how smoothly the domestic machinery ran. As he turned from Sybil on his right to Barbara on his left, he indulged in the complacent silent comment that neither of them was to be mentioned in the same breath with her. Barbara, of course, was an old story. She was pretty still; a sweet, placid face with dreamy eyes, he granted this. But she lacked Mary's height and also her straight, graceful figure. Never slim in her palmiest days, any one but an old friend might now almost term Barbara dumpy. It was obvious she was happy, but that she looked paler and not so spruce as formerly. Oliver wondered whether the double burden of keeping house and writing verse was not beginning to tell.

"How's the literary output?" he found himself inquiring.

Barbara's modest but radiant smile left no room for doubts concerning this, but her husband anticipated her response by exclaiming: "You've been slow, Ollie, in realizing that I've married a gold-mine. Instead of burning the midnight oil to keep the wolf from the door, like most young husbands, all I need to do is to fold my hands and watch the money pour in. Literary output? Allow me to call your attention, ladies and gentlemen, to the only extant remunerative producer of poetry. There she sits, and she has proved one of the most fundamental maxims of the publishing code to be a fallacy—that poetry doesn't pay. It does. She has demonstrated it, and the publishers are clamorous for more. How many editions was it, Bab, that we had sold day before yesterday?"

"Don't be absurd, Hamilton. Five, I believe. But——"

"And the seventh is now in press. And what is more, there's a contract signed and money down for a new play!"

Barbara was blushing now as well as beaming. "But you mustn't give all our secrets away."

"You've finished your play? Why didn't you tell me, you naughty girl?" cried Mary eagerly. Her expression had been almost stern while listening to Ham's raillery, for she knew that his wife was expecting a second olive-branch before many months should elapse.

"I finished it three weeks ago, but when it was actually done, I was fearful that no manager would accept it."

"Becoming modesty, sure sign of genius," murmured Oliver in her ear. His wife was right, her friend Barbara had decided talent and deserved her success.

"And now we're living high on the advance royalties," continued Ham to the table. "I'm thinking of getting out of business altogether."

Despite the manifest extravagance of this speech, Mary's eye kindled. "What you need to look out for, Ham, is that under all this pressure Barbara doesn't break down."

"I'm remarkably well, Mary—really." Barbara's prompt response was deprecatory but firm.

"You hear what she says," protested Ham. "I flatter myself that the encouragement I give her to work hard agrees with her and that she is never so happy as when occupied in bolstering up the family resources with her prolific pen."

Mary concealed her annoyance beneath a smile. She ought to have realized that Ham in one of his rollicking moods was incorrigible. All that his rodomontade

meant, of course, was that Barbara's successful volume had brought a very welcome addition to their income, several hundred dollars—she knew this from Barbara's own lips—and that the advance to secure the new play, however spectacular as a harbinger of profits to come, could not be more than a bagatelle from the pecuniary point of view. It was difficult not to be amused by Ham even when she did not altogether sympathize with his levity. He was short and thick-set; he had big, rather protuberant eyes; and his comedian's countenance, wide and creased, lent itself to drollery. Yet it did not follow, Mary reflected, that because he treated her admonition grotesquely, he might not pay heed to it later. Hearing him now, would any one suspect that at ordinary times, he was, though gay, very literal in his conversation and exact in his habits; a handy man about the house, with a natural aptitude for repairing or adjusting fixtures out of kilter? In this latter respect, indeed, he was noticeably superior to Oliver, who had willingness but no mechanical capacity.

Broke in Walter Price at this point: "I've been telling Miss Fielding, because she's been so long out of the country, something of the excitements and vicissitudes of the wheat market. But it appears I ought to add that the profits dwindle into insignificance beside those of literature. In fact if I were starting again or looking for an occupation, especially if I were a woman," he continued, turning his face significantly toward Sybil, "I'd become a literary broker; go in for being the medium of communication, for a suitable rake-off, between the shy, unpractical scribe with literary wares for sale and the smooth, sophisticated publisher. Not every rising celebrity has her Ham to protect her. I can't patent the idea, for it's not original. I met a woman the other day who said she was earning a pretty

penny by placing novels and plays. But the business isn't overworked yet. Seems to me, if I were a magazine editor or a theatrical manager, I should be putty in the hands of a certain type of young woman who came to me and informed me what I ought to do."

"The next moment you will be letting the cat out of the bag by telling us the type's name," exclaimed Ham. "Spare her blushes, Walter."

"It isn't altogether a bad idea; worth considering, certainly, with the other suggestions which you have in mind, Sybil," said Mary from her end of the table. She was less interested by the merits of the proposition than by her detection of Walter Price's susceptibility to the charms of her friend from across the seas. From the moment of taking the seat allotted him next to Sybil, his attention had never willingly strayed from her. It was evident that he had dragged her deliberately into the conversation for the purpose of paying her a bare-faced compliment. But though the qualities by which Walter shone, so Mary said to herself, might be termed bantam-like if not superficial, was he not lively, smart, and already well-to-do financially? A medium-sized, jaunty figure, a small shrewd face with a reluctant very blond mustache—there was nothing in his personality to prevent an unattached girl from fancying him, supposing that he were to fall in love with her.

Sybil was talking now. "Did Mr. Price have me in mind? I had no idea he was referring to me."

She looked at Mary, but her deprecating words of surprise were for the benefit of the company. Beneath the wonder in her tone there lurked for the ears of any but an obtuse listener a trace of something partly roguish, partly wistful, which awakened curiosity without impugning her statement. As she turned her face toward his wife, Oliver had the opportunity to observe with

greater freedom than before the contour of Sybil's features. For the moment, however, his desire to trace the physical lineaments was arrested by the effect of undisguised and utter helplessness emanating from her; an effect of which speech was merely the audible symbol.

She was shaking her head. "It sounds fascinating, but appalling. You're all so clever over here. That's the sort of thing I couldn't do at all. I should die of fright, for I have never tried to convince anybody; I've not been used to trying."

Again the completeness of her renunciation was qualified by that shade of something ulterior which perplexed one. Oliver suddenly put on it the interpretation that she was in earnest, but laughing at Walter Price. A woman may laugh in secret at another man with impunity. Oliver's appraisal as revealed by what he actually saw expressed itself in terms of comparison. What a contrast between this sensitive, doll-like specimen of womanhood, who shrank from initiative and invoked protection, and his clear-eyed, executive, independent wife! She was doll-like because so deliberately helpless and because of the impression of nicety which she produced; for he noted the neatness of her hair, the trigness of her attire despite the rusty mourning, and her scrupulously tended hands. And yet the hastily chosen phrase yielded, as he gazed, to the qualification that her charm—and she was undeniably charming—was not merely the dainty prettiness one associates with a doll. There was an animating quality in her which he did not attempt to analyze further than to perceive that it admitted her to the category of the women whom he deemed attractive, though she might fail to pass the higher test. He saw besides that her eyes were soft and darker than her hair, that one caught a glimpse of pretty teeth when she smiled, that her

cheeks, though wan, had dimples, and that the trinkets she wore, though slight, were becoming. So mutely unathletic was her figure that Mary standing at her side would tower above her. Yet insignificant was far from the correct word, for Miss Fielding was tall as Barbara Ford with the advantage that in her case a like tendency to plumpness wore the relieving grace of symmetry. But if to Oliver's appraising eye she appeared small and almost pitiful, it was because the crowning distinction between her and Mary—one which overshadowed everything else, and physical no less than mental—was the difference between weakness and strength, between languor and vitality.

Oliver's reflection that she was a nice helpless little thing, and that he would be kind to her, was arrested by noises in the hall. The maid was apparently placing without success the conventional obstacle of a dinner-party in the pathway of some intruder. Oliver tried to avoid looking guilty as his glance encountered Mary's clear-browed, unsuspicious curiosity.

"It's Mr. Dean, ma'am. I told him you'd company, but he said he'd wait in the smoking-room. He said, sir, you weren't to hurry on his account."

As all eyes turned to the master of the house for an explanation, Mary said: "You'd better ask him to join us, Ollie."

"Good old Everett Dean!" exclaimed Ham. "It's a wonder he didn't run to cover at the first mention of company. What's up in politics, Ollie?"

"Preparations for the State primaries. I clean forgot, until it was too late to change, that we'd agreed to check up the voting lists this evening. With all the night ahead of us, Everett won't mind waiting until I'm ready."

Mary's brow, already in suspense, fell at the word

politics. She said amiably but explicitly: "With any night of the week to choose from except this of our welcome to Sybil, one would think——"

"I'm dreadfully sorry, dear, but the date escaped my mind. The State election is bound to be close, and being on the ward committee, it's up to us to figure where we stand. The chairman depends on our statistics to ascertain how much work is necessary to deliver the goods."

The speech was solicitous and apologetic in spirit; but at its close it was plain that Oliver felt he had set up a plea almost as conclusive as the act of God or the king's enemies.

"Every one knows," cried Ham, "that Ollie would at any time rather play politics than eat."

"And," said Walter Price, "that the sweetest trophy in the world would be Steve Bartlett's political scalp dangling in the den."

Now Stephen Bartlett was the local ward leader of the opposition party. Oliver grinned; he evidently had no desire to deny the impeachment. He glanced down the table at his wife, and what he said seemed to be addressed to her. "The voters have the last word, but the fellow who works overtime is apt to win."

"You're not the candidate; you're working overtime for some one else," Mary responded.

"That's the way future Presidents of the United States begin," exclaimed Walter. Then he turned to Sybil to add: "Mr. Randall ought to have had the nomination to the legislature this time; he's certain to go next year."

"And notwithstanding he's modest and needs egging on," said Ham, pretending to screen his mouth with his hand, "his friends predict a big political future for him."

"Really?" Sybil appealed to, raised her drooping lids to take a new look at the prodigy. "I've always thought that if I had happened to be born a man instead of a weak woman, I'd have gone in for politics. They must be fascinating if one has a gift for them."

"A gift? I'm not aware of any gift, Miss Fielding. I am able to speak my piece so that every one can hear it, if that's what you mean; and I enjoy counting noses about election time." Then realizing that his disclaimer was rapidly acquiring the semblance of an admission, Oliver blurted out, with an attempt at a frown: "Don't pay any attention to them; they're a pair of base flatterers."

"But you know you do speak uncommonly well, Ollie. I heard you once straighten out a meeting where every one was at loggerheads and I was electrified."

This statement, proceeding from the literary Barbara, was calculated to disconcert a modest man. But before Oliver could decide how to evade this fresh tribute, Mary's candid voice took up the cudgels for him.

"I remember, Barbara. It was at the meeting to discuss the location for the new library, very soon after his admission to the bar; and we all thought his speech much the best. But I sympathize with Ollie—and necessarily there's no one who is prouder of his accomplishments or more ambitious for him than I—in thinking it a shame that you should all be laying stress on his ability for managing caucuses just at the time when as a family man his energies are concentrated on his profession and on earning enough to keep us going. Politics is his hobby; one of the best hobbies, of course, a man can have; even though it leads him to forget that he has asked company to dinner."

Mary's eyes were bright and her cheeks a little flushed. She was glad of the opportunity to offset the effect of

what struck her as premature flattery. She accompanied the last words with a smile so that all might perceive they were arch, not a covert reprimand; and as she caught her husband's eye meeting hers in relieved gratitude for her succor, she added gayly: "We forgive you, Ollie, dearest; and as soon as you see fit to escape we release you to the society of your beloved Everett Dean and your beloved pipe."

CHAPTER IV

MARY RANDALL'S baby proved to be a healthy boy. None of her preparations for this event miscarried, and her convalescence was rapid. There were women in Benham—their names had been whispered to her—who, associating cleverness and enlightenment with derision of nature's reproductive processes as clumsy, bore and nursed their unwelcome babies with a sorry grace. With such she had no sympathy, if for no other reason because of the futility of flying in the face of a natural law, in the making of which woman had not been consulted to be sure, but which she was powerless to rectify. What programme of feminine amelioration could hope to prevail which did not continue to point to maternity as woman's noblest asset? This had been clear to her subconsciously before she became a mother, and now with her baby in her arms she revelled in the joy of her healthy mindedness.

In those first days when she lay serene through ownership of this mite beside her, she was glad of the opportunity afforded for tranquil thinking. Her thoughts, clear as crystal, projected themselves backward from the climax of this precious new possession to the limit of her earliest memories. She reviewed her girlhood; summed up the characteristics of her parents. She was devotedly attached to both of them. If she had outgrown them both, was it not because the world had moved so fast since they were young? From her father, who earned his daily bread as a physician, but whose heart was in biological investigation, she had inherited

her own methodical, orderly instincts, and her propensity for piercing to the root of things. She could see that she was her mother over again, energetic, high-strung, self-reliant, and mentally inquisitive, but plus a wider range of imagination and minus a certain ascetic quality which, mistaking the joy of living for materialism, had checked the current of enthusiastic impulse. She recalled how she had suddenly awakened at seventeen to find herself a created entity; yet she had not, like some girls, repudiated this consciousness with reproachful words which cast the blame for imperfections on her bringing up. No, her parents had lived up to their lights. Their shortcomings, palpable enough, dwindled into insignificance in the balance with the loving care and wisdom of which she was the faulty but aspiring product. How much she had to be thankful for! And were they not entitled to a large slice of her gratitude?

She could thank herself, however, for Oliver and the baby. The precious, wonderful baby. When he grew up, he should be just like Oliver, but a genius. Not that it mattered in the least that Oliver was not a genius, but only his sensible, able-bodied self. Could she love him any better if he were? Thus musing, Mary smiled, for there stole into her mind the remembrance of Barbara's allusion to the speech which Oliver had made at the meeting to select the site for a library. It was while he was courting her—a few months before they were engaged. They had discussed the question on the way to the meeting. When later he had risen to speak, and spoken so effectively—the elocution, the tact, and the adroitness had all been his, but the ideas were hers.

There were other diversions during her convalescence. Henry Ives Thornton had sent her from a clear sky a basket of roses, a gratifying incident as showing that

he bore no malice and as suggesting the hope that they could meet as friends. Besides her mother, Barbara and Sybil were constantly in and out of the chamber, and from what Barbara let fall and Sybil omitted to say, it was clear that Walter Price was taking notice of the latter. He was sending her flowers, and they had been seen walking together in out-of-the-way places.

Among her visitors was Mrs. George Patterson, who called twice, bringing a contribution from her larder on each occasion—jelly the first time and later a rich, but delectable cake. Kindly attentions, if only the donor had not garnished her gifts with one of her favorite unctuous formulas, uttered in an awe-inspired tone:

“Aren’t you proud to have such a very clever man as a husband? George says that Mr. Randall is certain to go far. Uncommonly level-headed and certain to go far; those were his very words.”

Proud? Of course she was proud. But one would imagine from the language of this goose of a woman that Oliver was already a leader in his profession, instead of an industrious beginner.

It was gratifying to be able so soon to leave her room, and presently to resume, without challenge from the doctor, her ordinary activities. She was not to be one of the young mothers—she knew of several—who for one cause or another recuperated so slowly from nature’s demand upon them as to be virtually invalids. She was thankful too that Oliver had been thrown on his own domestic resources for so brief a period. Of course she had arranged that he should be looked after, but his delight at her reappearance down-stairs was the best of proofs he had missed her. They were doubly united by this new, inspiring bond of parentage. No wonder that Oliver felt a fresh incentive to industry. At her suggestion he had insured his life, so that if they should

both be cut off prematurely, there would be something for the baby. Oliver rarely reached home now while it was daylight. She had a suspicion that he did most of the work of the firm, and this seemed inequitable, seeing that he received only a minor share of the profits.

It was not long before Mary was vigorous as ever; stronger, it seemed, in that she was conscious of a new elastic suppleness. Even though this might be partly spiritual—a reflex of her happiness—it enabled her to put up so stiff a game of tennis against Oliver as almost to defeat him. She was more agile, she had acquired a swifter stroke. When at last they resumed their tramps through the sylvan suburbs which environed Benham, she had no difficulty in keeping up with him. She seemed to walk on wings, so buoyant and untrammelled did she feel. She could not quite compete in stature with the kind mastiff of a husband at her side, but she appeared to have grown taller by at least half an inch. And at home awaiting her there was always that little treasure of a being—her own—in his downy cot. Nor was this elasticity merely physical in manifestation. When she set apart again—as she did almost immediately—her quiet hour in each day for design work, the increased dexterity of her fingers responded to a brain teeming with fancies.

The baby was christened Martin as the result of logical elimination by Mary. For the first-born she preferred a family name. To call a child after his father—the natural choice from the point of view of sentiment—inserts a new cog in the domestic machinery which creates endless confusion. To skip a generation in the paternal line has everything to recommend it, save when the name is peculiar. Oliver's father was named Israel, which was biblical but odd. He was dead and could not be gratified by the selection. Her own father was

alive and would be greatly pleased, and Martin was a strong and not too common name. Martin Arnold Randall would sound well. Or, if the child preferred when he grew up, he could drop the Martin and simply use Arnold. It pleased Mary particularly that Oliver not merely acquiesced, but pronounced her reasoning unanswerable.

One day, some four months after the birth of the baby, Oliver on his return from the office found his wife impatiently awaiting his arrival because of an agitating piece of news. The Hamilton Fords had twins—twin girls. Mary was seething with a mixture of consternation and protest. How would they manage now? Barbara's play had been accepted; but subject to revision; the third act must be materially altered. Barbara had counted on setting to work on it as soon as she was well. And now, at the very time when she ought to be sheltered from domestic responsibilities, this catastrophe had occurred. Did Oliver realize what complications twins entailed? Double sets of everything, not to mention the doubling of the expenses. Her prediction was being borne out to the letter; this came of marrying a husband without initiative like Hamilton Ford.

"It's bad luck under the circumstances; but I don't quite see, Mary, why you should throw the entire blame on poor Ham."

Mary arched her eyebrows, but refrained from saying that she supposed it was too much to expect that a man would not misunderstand, if he could, where another man was being hauled over the coals. "I'm blaming him, dear, because he holds such a subordinate position down-town that he has not the means to shield his wife at a critical period in her artistic development from the stress of three children in two years. The nurse says poor Bab looked crushed at first, and then, like the

motherly angel she is, rose to the crisis by declaring that they are adorable and that she is delighted. Think of that, Ollie, positively glad; and she just brimming over with talent eager to put itself on paper. I've seen them. They're darlings; exceedingly cunning and like as two peas. No one will ever be able to tell them apart, except possibly the men they marry, which is always awkward."

"And Ham—how did he take it?" asked Oliver, who not unnaturally was interested in the father's frame of mind.

"Just as you might expect; disposed to be philosophically facetious. He murmured something about putting up a sign over the door 'Little Wanderers' Home.' I felt like boxing his ears. We are going up there to-night after dinner, for I wish to do everything I can to assist Barbara."

At dinner, since she had relieved her mind and was able to elicit no more valuable suggestion from Oliver than the delivery of a round robin to the manager of the Trust Company where Ham was employed urging an increase in salary—which was virtually an evasion of her real grievance—Mary branched off to a secondary piece of news which she had heard that day. Walter Price was thinking seriously of Sybil Fielding and was in the moth-and-candle stage of courtship. Though he gave occasional signs of struggling to escape, he had formed the habit of dropping in at her lodgings, had taken her twice to drive, and frequently sent her flowers.

"This doesn't mean," continued Mary, "that I would have picked out Walter for her. It happens, as you know, Ollie, that of your bachelor friends he is the one whom I care for least. I simply don't fancy him. But he's spritely and good-natured, and appears to be amply able to support a wife."

"If nothing goes wrong, he's sure to be rich some day."

"That will suit Sybil. If ever a girl needed to be married, it's she. It isn't that she is unwilling to help herself; she can't; she doesn't know how to begin. She likes comfort, permanence, and being made much of—especially by men. If I were to stroke her, I should almost expect to hear her purr. She was always more or less like that; but it has grown on her; her foreign life has conduced to this feminine helplessness; yet at the same time she's a dear, and cultivated too in a Bohemian amateurish kind of way. It is providential that having fallen in love—and I suspect she is in love with Walter Price if he is with her—she will be able to sit with folded hands for the rest of her life, and at the same time be just the ornamental, æsthetic sort of wife of whom a man like Walter would be inordinately proud. Of course in a sense she is thrown away on him; for though he is smart, he always impresses me as lacking soul."

Oliver did not feel the need of vindicating Walter. Despite her absence of enthusiasm, Mary was invariably civil to him; and though a good fellow in the every-day sense, there was no denying that he savored of the earthy. His wife's estimate of Sybil fitted into and illumined his own preconception of her. Clearly she was charming, but temperamentally fragile, and she would appear to be wise if she accepted an available niche where she would be safe from contact with the wear and tear which would have no terrors for a more enterprising spirit.

They found Ham, as Mary had said, blithe and disposed to be facetious. He was at his desk making a list in his methodical way of appropriate names for twins; names which should be euphonious and distinc-

tive, yet not sensational. He ran off a few, but without eliciting a syllable from Mary to indicate that any of them would suit his daughters. At his elbow were the butcher's and grocer's books and a pile of bills, which, as he cheerily explained, he was about to pay by check in order to relieve his wife. Mary, whose refusal to sit down left no room for doubt that her visit was prompted solely by solicitude for the twins, was on the point of departing up-stairs when the spirit moved her to say candidly:

"Barbara ought to be relieved of tasks like those all the time."

During the brief silence which followed this speech, Mary disappeared and consequently lost the reply, which was obviously that of one to whom the suggestion came as a surprise.

"So she ought, and so she shall, by thunder!"

Thereupon Ham rose and having offered hospitality in the form of tobacco, forsook his chair at the desk for a standing posture with his back to the fire, a favorite attitude when he wished to philosophize. "Mary's a wonderful woman, Ollie," he asserted. "You ought to have seen her setting things to rights this morning when the household went up in the air after the arrival of two little strangers in place of one. She's down on me and I don't blame her; I deserve it. Economically speaking, I'm a flub. I've got Barbara in a fix by quartering three kids on her when she's crazy to write books, and my ability is so infernally mediocre that I don't manage to make enough to provide her with a house-keeper and nursery governess, which would put her on easy street."

"I can lend you anything up to a hundred dollars, if that'll help."

"A thousand thanks, old fellow. No, it isn't the lack

of ready cash. We've been saving up for the event, and there's sufficient in the bank," exclaimed Ham with a wave of his hand toward his check-book on the desk. "It's the future I'm worrying about, and it's the future your wife is thinking of. She's saying to herself every time she looks at me that in a year or two at this rate Barbara will be a household drudge and I guilty in the first degree of murdering genius."

"Twins are enough to rattle any man. But they're only an accident."

"Don't be too sure. One of the first things Barbara whispered to me—and she is sweet about it—was that her grandmother had twins. I never knew it. And my mother who came over to hold my hand hadn't been in the house fifteen minutes before she allowed that two of her aunts had twins. I had never been told that before, either. So they're on both sides of the family, and a second edition is simply a question of luck; the real point being that unless I sleep on the roof there are certain to be more children sooner or later, though they may come only one at a time."

"You're doing the best you can," asserted Oliver sturdily.

"But am I?"

"You've no extravagant tastes. You don't waste your money. You don't even smoke, confound it!"

Ham shook his head. "That's all very well for you, Ollie. You've got brains; you're not a commonplace duffer like me. By the time your wife has presented you with three or four little olive-branches, you'll be earning ten thousand a year."

"But my wife will look after her children and attend to her domestic duties just the same. You don't know Mary if you think otherwise."

"So will Barbara, if I let her. That's the trouble.

She'll just squander herself if I don't hinder her. And there's where a woman's wits are sometimes keener than a man's. Did you hear your wife tip me the wink? She sees clearer than either of us."

"It seemed to me that Mary was rubbing it in. I tried to call her off before we started."

Ham shook his head. "Not a bit. On the contrary, she has given me an idea. I'm a poor hand at originating ideas; but when I'm provided with a good one, I resemble a dog with a bone." He paused and Oliver noticed his broad face suddenly break into creases, and his round eyes bulge and sparkle as if he were possessed by something which tickled his fancy.

"What's in your mind?"

Ham's misgivings, which would have amounted to distress in one less constitutionally cheerful, had vanished as if by magic. But though he looked almost waggish, his words had a tender sound. "I've got to spare her somehow, even though I make myself ridiculous."

"You ridiculous?" Oliver scanned the squat, genial personality, the touchstone of whose fascination for him had ever been its spontaneous, quaintly jovial humor. "It's the fellows who try to be funny and aren't who make themselves ridiculous."

"I guess I can stand it, anyway; I'll have to stand it."

As Ham spoke the sound of footsteps tripping down the stairs signalled Mary's approach. He laid a thick finger on his lips. "You needn't let on. Maybe it's only a pipe-dream," he whispered warningly, though his countenance still wore its aspect of suppressed merriment.

Oliver nodded. He had derived no inkling of what was meant beyond the commendable purpose, disclosed by Ham's words, to make conditions less burdensome for

Barbara. If Ham thought he saw a way to lighten her domestic load so as to leave her more leisure for writing, he ought to experiment, though he had already impressed him as being considerate of his wife to a degree which fully satisfied his own exacting and freshly blooming ideals of matrimony. Though there was an unwritten compact between himself and Mary that there should be no secrets between them, he was ready to enter into an alliance of silence on the strength of the digs which his wife, out of solicitude concerning her best friend's literary career, had seen fit to administer to a husband—his friend—already doing his best. While he admired her loyalty, he ascribed the injustice to tenseness of feeling due to the arrival of the twins—but the tragic quality of that event would presently wear off. As Ham and Barbara were husband and wife and devoted to each other, it could be taken for granted that Mary would descend from her high horse after a few days. In the meantime why afford her the opportunity for further thrusts? Especially as he was by no means sure that Ham's nerves had not gone up in the air with those of the womenkind concerned.

Accordingly Oliver dismissed the confidence, such as it was. The course of events immediately affecting his own household provided ample excuse. The first of these was the death of his wife's father, a misfortune which seemed sudden despite the knowledge that he had been failing for a year or two. Mary's own emotional sorrow found, after the first outbursts of grief, an incentive to self-control in the obvious duty of helping her mother to show fortitude. Mrs. Arnold bore the shock with the deliberate calm and wan cheerfulness which the keen but ascetic tendencies of a lifetime imposed on her. But she presently appeared much broken. Her husband's death did not necessitate an alteration

in her mode of living, if she encroached on the principal of the property he left her. Under the guise of having Oliver settle the estate because he was a lawyer, Mary assumed control of the purse-strings. There must be no economies where her mother's well-being was concerned; she must be provided with the comforts which befitted her age and increasing feebleness—delicacies, luxuries even. For the next few months all Mary's superfluous energy was absorbed by filial devotion. Then suddenly one day she was appalled to realize that she was again to become a mother.

At first Mary felt that nature had played an unfair trick on her. She had intended to have more children—she was eager for a daughter—but not for at least two years, when they would be better able to afford it. Though, acknowledging the inevitability of nature's law, she felt that the life force which rushed a child into the world before it was wholly welcome needed regulation.

Mary did not tell Oliver for a fortnight. By this time she had recovered her aplomb and submitted to her lot. She afforded him sufficient glimpses of her state of mind to enable him to realize that the prospect was a bore; yet she was able to wax enthusiastic at the thought of a girl. His surprise rivalled her own, but his prompt philosophic acceptance of the situation by invoking the cheerful formula, "they'll be companions for each other," nettled her slightly in that it seemed naïvely to ignore her predicament. When he went on to remark that he must increase his life insurance, something moved her to say:

"It seems a suitable time for inviting your partners to allow you a larger share of the profits."

Oliver replied that he would bear this in mind. Very likely the partners would suggest it. The important

consideration was to make himself so indispensable that they could not refuse when asked.

His attitude recalled to Mary Ham's jibe, apropos of politics, that he was too modest and stood in need of prodding: "I'm looking forward to the day when you set up for yourself."

"So am I, and particularly because you're anxious I should. But it would be a poor moment to choose just now when——"

"I understand, dear. We must wait, of course. But afterward you ought to feel free for an indefinite period."

If Oliver understood the thinly veiled hint, he disregarded it from his interest in the other topic. "There are many arguments in favor of staying on. The business is expanding, and I shouldn't be surprised any day to hear that Mr. Smallpage, whose wife has inherited a fortune, had decided to draw out. In that case——"

"But our idea—your idea—has always been that you should strike out for yourself; build up a firm which has your name at the head."

"It is still. But circumstances alter cases. There's such a thing as building up a firm from the bottom." He smiled indulgently, but Mary noticed a suggestion of obstinacy about his lips. She felt suddenly tremulous; as if she were going to cry. In another instant she was in his arms and looking lovingly into his face. Sweeping back the curly hair from his brow, she said: "I've such faith in you, Ollie, that I want to see you first everywhere." She paused an instant, then continued softly: "And whatever I seem, I'm really happy at the prospect of a daughter, notwithstanding she is coming before we're quite ready for her."

His enfolding embraces were tonic, accompanied as they were by the protestation: "There's nothing in the world I desire so much as to please you, Mary." She

buried her face on his shoulder, to raise it after a moment and murmur: "What a pity I don't like Nettie Patterson better."

She felt him press her closer. But he was saying in a tone which bordered on amusement: "I would never have dared to insinuate that your aversion to her is the chief ground of your haste for me to leave the firm if you hadn't confessed it."

"It isn't the ground; it merely supplements the ground. We were agreed from the outset that you would sever your connection with the firm as soon as you could." Mary looked up into his face plaintively: "But I can't endure seeing you subordinate to a man whose standards are constantly being undermined at home. Don't you understand, Oliver? She means well, I suppose; she may not be able to avoid appearing foolish and self-indulgent; my distaste for her may be exaggerated by prejudice. Yet you can't help acknowledging that her ideals are not my ideals—nor yours."

"Very likely. But why not disassociate the husband from the wife?"

"Impossible. So long as they live together, each inevitably operates upon the other; that's what marriage means. And in this case she controls him through the senses."

Oliver did not reply for an instant. Mary was conscious that he was weighing her words. She hoped she had made him understand at last.

"George is no weakling. George is a hard worker; but a good fellow."

This summary, subdivided by pauses, was obviously a vigorous endeavor to convince.

"Under the last item in your testimonial all the masculine frailties have been known to flourish un-

molested, I believe, except disagreeable manners and lack of financial honesty or personal courage."

Mary rejoiced in her sententiousness. She was glad of the opportunity to prick this bladder-like buffer, "a good fellow," by which all the men of her acquaintance—even her hero—were accustomed to repulse too searching feminine criticism of their male friends. Oliver was looking at her with wondering eyes, uncertain what to think of her clever penetration, though he ought to be accustomed by this time to her capacity for unmasking the truth, and she added as if to temper the asperity of her speech: "You know it's so, Ollie. 'A good fellow' may mean everything that's undesirable from a woman's standpoint."

He was smiling, too, now. "Well, occasionally, perhaps. But George Patterson is clean as a smelt so far as I know. What frailties do you suspect him of?"

"I'm not suspecting him; I was criticising her. You know as well as I do, for you have remarked on it yourself, that she goes out of her way to cater to his baser instincts—his vanity and his appetites—instead of trying to fix his interest when they are together on higher things. That will cause any man to deteriorate in the long run."

"Maybe. But she isn't half so bad as you think. Your deduction is one-half prejudice."

"But the other half isn't. Would you be pleased to have me resemble her?"

Though her purpose was merely to point her moral by letting him note the difference, Mary straightened herself as if she were on the point of being photographed and wished to look her best. Her demeanor said plainly: "You know you would abominate me." Yet now that the comparison was invited, she was not averse to bringing home to her husband how wide the difference was.

If she prided herself on her good looks (her glass had long ago told her that she was handsome rather than pretty), it was because she believed that her character—her passionate yearning to make the most of life—was reflected in her face. In regard to her personal appearance she was inspired neither by conceit nor coquetry, merely by the self-respecting motive to appear just as she was, a well-developed woman, tall and of gracefully erect carriage, with a fresh coloring in thorough harmony with the alert frankness and open-mindedness peculiar to her expression, and bluish gray eyes, candid but luminous, in a broad brow the lines of which were not too much hidden by wavy light-brown hair, tidy, though profuse. Her nose was straight and of good size, but unobtrusive. Her mouth—which she knew to be her worst feature because it was a trifle large—was embellished by the redness of her lips and the whiteness of her teeth, effects which testified to her vitality and at the same time served as a carnal foil to the more intellectual graces of her countenance. She was well aware that she was neither a beauty nor exceptionally captivating. She simply flattered herself that any discerning person would be apt to think: "There goes an interesting-looking woman who seems to combine personal attraction and style with an enlightened constructive spirit."

To Oliver's discerning eye Mary appeared all this and more. The absurdities of a comparison between her and his partner's easy-going wife were superseded by a thrill of amatory pride which blinded him to everything save the charm of this preceptress of his better self, and found expression in the words:

"It's scarcely a fair test to expect other women to measure up to you." The speech was a preface to an attempt to take her in his arms again. This she nimbly

eluded; but an instant later, suffering herself to be caught, she nestled there as if to let him see that at the proper time she could be as tame as a gazelle. Then she heard him say:

"I may see my way to it—it may work out as you wish—sooner than we expect. The question is one mainly of expediency; of what will put me ahead furthest in the long run. And very likely you may be right that the time has nearly come for me to cut loose and go it alone."

Some compunction moved her to interject: "I don't really know so very much about it; only——"

"I understand. And I don't mind telling you in confidence that twice in the last little while men of my own age whose fathers are giving them a free hand have intimated that presently they intend to let me do all their law business."

CHAPTER V

MARY'S prediction was correct; the new baby proved to be a healthy girl. Everything went as it should. With two shafts to her bow, the quiver of her happiness seemed complete. The children *would* be companions for one another; she delighted in the possession of a daughter; and, as in the case of little Martin, her recuperation was rapid and void of after effects. Again she walked on tiptoe from elasticity and was sensible of added power, the source of which might well be the strange, but wonderful ordeal of maternity. This function must needs lie fallow for the present (if not forever); and she was now free to resume her ordinary avocations. With fresh zest, too, because of her sanely cheerful attitude toward child-bearing.

Again her brain felt abnormally clear and teemed with fancies. Her first duty clearly was to accustom herself to looking after two babies instead of one. By a little forethought, combined with systematic co-operation between her and the maid, this was accomplished so as to leave her as soon as the baby was weaned nearly as much time as before; and the earliest use made of this modicum of leisure was to shut herself up and give free play to her imagination on a design for a garden fountain, a conception which had occurred to her while convalescing. This struck Mary as the most artistic work she had ever done, and instead of consigning it to her portfolio as had been her wont since marriage, she exhibited the design to Oliver in the evening,

saying: "I've half a mind to send this to a competition. If it should happen to win a prize, I could buy some pretty clothes for Christabel."

The baby's name had been the result of tactful compromise. By choosing her own, which was also her mother's name, she would please both the latter and Oliver, who had declared he preferred it to any other. But a third Mary would breed endless confusion. Besides she felt a yearning for a touch of fantasy, something by way of nomenclature which chimed in with and reflected her own tiptoe mood. So Mary Christabel had been fixed on, and for daily use the Mary eliminated.

Oliver was enthusiastic over her design for the fountain and urged her to send it to the competition. She had scarcely despatched it when he became insistent on her acceptance of the Fords' invitation to be present at the first metropolitan production of Barbara's play. This would entail a trip to New York, an allurements in itself. The play had already been tested by a single performance in one of the smaller Eastern cities—tried on a dog, as the phrase was—and had been civilly treated by the critics. Naturally Barbara was tense with excitement, and was most eager for her companionship. Oliver could not get away; and the cause of his detention—the rather irritating cause—was not his law business, but politics.

It appeared that the date clashed with that fixed for the State primaries, a somewhat simple dilemma to escape from by pleading the superior exigencies of the trip. Where were "good old Everett Dean" and the rest of the committee? Surely the absence for a few days of a single member could not matter. The conclusion seemed unavoidable to Mary that Oliver was exaggerating—unintentionally of course—the importance of his remaining at home. He had urged her to go from the

beginning; but whenever the question of his accompanying her was broached, he simply said he could not, most good-naturedly; but behind his good nature she detected something almost adamant, for he had evidently dismissed it as undebatable.

"I thought," she said, "that Steve Bartlett, or whatever his name is, was completely snowed under, as you call it, a year ago."

"So he was; all the more reason for keeping him under."

He grinned like an amiable sphinx as he spoke. He did not even assert that the political issue was in doubt. His unwillingness to make any effort to escape from the assumption that he could not get away provoked—almost appalled her. What could this argue save that the lure of futile local politics was greater than that of an opportunity to be present on the first night of a new play and to double his wife's pleasure by joining the party?

Had he been detained by law business, Mary said to herself that she would have been inclined to remain at home from sentiment, for this would be their first separation. To do so would have been a great disappointment, and not improbably they would have decided on reflection that the sacrifice was disproportionate. But on the score of the reason alleged she felt no compunctions about going, though she hated to leave him behind. In his stead Henry Ives Thornton was going, with whom she had not exchanged a dozen words since her refusal of him. She could truthfully say she was glad he had recovered his spirits, and she hoped to see him happily married.

Mary was absent just a week. As she alighted from the train on her return, radiant and with so much exciting information to impart that she scarcely knew

where to begin, she threw herself into her husband's arms, exclaiming:

"I'm so glad to be back, because it's you. But I've had a heavenly time. The play is a great success already—really. We all saw it from a stage-box, and they tried to call Barbara before the curtain; but Ham went instead and sent the audience away in good humor. And, Ollie dear, there's something thrilling to break to you concerning the Fords. I won't explain until we are in the carriage. But if it works out as it promises, I take back nearly everything I've said derogatory to Ham. He's planning to do something big—big in the broad, idealistic sense. It may even tend to make him ridiculous at first; but he doesn't care, he needn't care. That's all for the moment, though I'm only just beginning my news. And how are you, dearest one? And the sweet babes? How have you been getting along without me?" she asked, pressing closer to the arm she clutched as they swept along the platform and seeking fondly to scrutinize his face.

"All well. I wanted you to have a change, but I won't pretend I haven't missed you horribly. It reminded me too much of my bachelor days."

"Which means, I presume, bad boy, that you've been smoking like mad and committing all sorts of imprudences, if not extravagances. It was time I came home. One of the tangible results of the trip—though I can't expect you to muster up much surprise—is that Sybil and Walter are definitely engaged at last. She has accepted him, and they are to be married in the spring."

On the way to the house Mary expatiated on the delights of her holiday. New York had entranced her, but was too huge and bewildering; it seemed to have doubled in size since her single previous visit five years

before. She would not live there for anything. But it was a stimulating metropolis, and she had brought back various fresh impressions, both conjugal and civic, for future guidance or warning. She had been the most impressed—more even than by the opulence and display—by the changed public attitude of womankind and toward womankind. Self-respecting single women were chafing under the ignominy of allowing well-disposed or patronizing male relatives to support them. Instead of trying to exist on a pittance and keep up social appearances, energetic single women and widows were striking out for themselves in many directions. Of course, if a man treated his wife atrociously, she simply refused to live with him. And it was in the air wherever she had gone—alike among the playwrights, the society people, and the women's clubs—that the conventions and subterfuges by which women had been kept in the dark as to the wickedness of the world, under the pretense of screening them, were being stripped away. Henceforth spades were to be recognized as spades and talked of as spades, not as prunes and prisms. Thanks to the friends of one or another of the party, their social opportunities had been exceptionally many-sided.

"It's a big eye-opening, nerve-racking place," responded Oliver, crushing one of her hands in his. "I'm glad you've had such a fine chance to make the rounds, even though Benham was proved in the process to be a trifle behind the times."

"I didn't say that, Ollie. Benham isn't behind the times. Benham is considerably smaller than New York—less cosmopolitan undoubtedly. But what interested me most was the discovery—which I suspected already, but rejoiced to have confirmed—that the ideas which the thoughtful women here have been setting in motion are merely part of a great world movement which is gain-

ing headway every hour. And curiously enough," added Mary eagerly, "the practical proof that Benham can't be much behind the times is provided by what I am just dying to tell you about Ham and Barbara. He has offered to undertake—and she has consented to let him try—all the housekeeping; the ordering of the meals, the management of the servants, the supervision of the children—in short all the domestic duties. Barbara is to be free to consecrate as many hours a day as she chooses to her literary work. Isn't it thrilling? Isn't it the only magnanimous solution? The solution was plain, but to be willing to adopt it required magnanimity; and I'm proud that a Benham man has risen so gloriously to the mark. I wasn't going to tell you until we were settled down comfortably for the evening, but your intimation that Benham must necessarily play second fiddle to New York just forced it out of me. I'm proud of Ham and happy as a skylark on dear Bab's account."

Oliver, whose preliminary ebullitions of surprise had been restrained by this apostrophe, was chuckling all over. "So that's what he was up to! That's the mysterious sacrifice which was going to make him ridiculous! It must—it's bound to, but if any man can carry it off successfully, it's Ham. Take over the kitchen and the nursery both? Ho! ho! That's doing the topsyturvy act with a vengeance. You're fooling me, Mary? Well here you are at home again."

Her eyes were sparkling with enthusiasm as he helped her out of the vehicle.

"The scheme is in working order already. They've been at it for some time, the sly things, and never even whispered a word. Ham cooked the entire dinner the day before they started on the trip just to prove what he could do."

Oliver, who was paying the driver, turned with a start. "Don't tell me that he is to do the cooking. It's—it's monstrous. What's to become of his work down-town?"

"Don't get excited, dear, and I'll tell you all about it," said Mary putting her arm through his and leading him toward the house. "He isn't to cook except in an emergency. One of the two maids will do the regular cooking; but if she suddenly departs and the choice lies between him and Barbara, Ham will do it. Similarly as to the children, he won't actually give them their baths except on rare occasions; but he will hold himself responsible for the efficiency of the maid who does; and when they have pains or aches he will be the first consulted and Barbara let alone until there is need she should know. It took a long time to persuade Bab to consent not to be bothered about the children, but Ham finally made her realize that they couldn't both run the household. So she has abdicated completely, and Ham—well, Ollie, now that he has risen to the situation, he is captivated by it. It's delicious to hear him talk." Before entering the house Mary paused on the threshold for another fond but searching look at her trig garden and tennis-court. "I don't see that they've suffered by my absence," she said, pressing her cheek to her husband's, "and it is fun to be home again. For the present," she resumed, "Ham goes to his office just as usual—leaves the house at the same hour. But he gets up half an hour earlier and is systematizing everything, so he says; applying to housekeeping the methodical care which he gives to his clerical employment at the office. Method was always his only really strong point in the way of ability; and he may have found in this necessary work his genuine niche. He is already forecasting for himself a luxurious, brilliant future—you can imagine how he would run on—when by virtue

of Barbara's large royalties he will be able to give up his humdrum position down-town and conduct a magnificent establishment with a minimum of friction by means of scientific formulas. He says we are to reserve our praise until he really gets into his stride, and I dare say there is a useful suggestion or two behind his tomfoolery; of course there's no judging until one sees his methods working with one's own eyes. But the most interesting result of his decision at first blush, excepting for the relief afforded to dear Barbara, is that it promises to make almost a hero of a man who was fated otherwise to be a nonentity."

"And startling as it is," replied Oliver, whose loyal desire for a key to the enigma was getting the better of his risibilities, "the decision was just like Ham. Those who know him best recognize that he is an idealist at heart, though he tries ordinarily to conceal it. The explanation is, I suppose, that, adoring Barbara, he saw no other way out for her."

"There was no other way out. But one may be an idealist and be deficient in grasp. Some of the most futile people in the world are those who mean well, but don't know how. There's where I underestimated Ham, and I apologize—humbly. Do me the justice, Ollie dear, to take note that I apologize."

Mary had returned from New York unaccompanied. The remaining members of the party had prolonged their absence for one cause or another. Henry Thornton had business in Washington, the Fords wished to follow the fortunes of the play for a few days longer, and the engaged couple had lingered so as to pay a visit to Sybil's aunt in Providence. Consequently Oliver had time to get accustomed to the idea of Ham's revolutionary project before he beheld it in operation. So far as external manifestations were concerned there was little to in-

dicating the domestic overturn. Ham was jovially meek, as if prepared to be a target for invidious banter if not invective. But it was not an apologetic meekness. On the contrary, his businesslike demeanor during Oliver's first visit at afternoon tea time, when two telephone calls, a mysterious summons from the nursery and a twelfth-hour whisper from the kitchen that part of the dinner had not arrived set in motion his new prerogatives, demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt that he was thoroughly in earnest. Ham did not avoid the situation, but tossed it lightly as a ball, predicting that Barbara's efforts to make him a multimillionaire would be compensated presently by a flawless domestic régime.

His wife sat by and sipped her tea, fondly acquiescent and grateful; yet she was moved to demur, "he made me," when Oliver's masculine gaze rested on her interrogatively. "But the experiment is working wonderfully," she added. "It's grand not to be interrupted on any excuse short of a fire—though I have to stuff cotton-wool in my ears so as not to think I hear the children cry. And Ham is a splendid housekeeper—already. He is managing far better than I ever did or could, and he really seems to have plenty of time left."

It was difficult to gainsay such mutual testimony. Stripped of Ham's persiflage and exaggeration, did not the revolution amount simply to this, that Barbara had obtained a working-day to herself and was spared the friction of a hundred and one trivial demands on her time, the imperiousness of which had already been stemmed by masculine method? Under the existing arrangement Ham did not cook, nor was he called on thus far to sweep or to make the beds. But at the worst, come to think of it, were not the most competent cooks in the world men—chefs so called? And by way of

precedents for masculine chamber work one had merely to cite Chinamen and ocean stewards. Returning from his visit of inspection, Oliver recognized the sagacity of Mary's comment: "He is simply helping her out where she is far from strong and she is helping him out where he is lamentably weak. Why shouldn't it be so? When a woman is fit to be a bread-winner, and has the earmarks of genius besides, why should her career be sacrificed to a hard-and-fast narrow preconception as to what each should or should not do? The people you would expect to laugh are laughing already; but all the arrangement involves is a slight shifting of the conjugal point of view to meet the obligations of an individual case."

During the next few months the attention of the Randalls was diverted from the Ford domestic experiment by a series of events which followed in quick succession. Within a month of her return from New York, Mary lost her mother, whom increasing weakness made the easy prey of pneumonia. Though Mary wept her eyes out at the severing of this last tie which bound her to the past, there was negative comfort for her in becoming heir to one-half of the residue of her father's estate. She already had a check-book with which to settle the household bills; this had been her arrangement with Oliver from the first. But the money came from him, for the very moderate sum owned by her at the time of their marriage had been sunk in furniture and upholsteries. It was pleasant to feel that now she would be able to pay at least for her own clothes and that a new margin of safety between comfort and stringency had been provided from Arnold resources. Her inheritance was just under ten thousand dollars; inconsiderable as wealth, but she felt rich nevertheless. One of her first thoughts was that on the strength of

what she had in securities and in the bank Oliver need no longer hesitate to set up for himself.

As it happened, a decision on this particular matter was demanded almost immediately by Mr. Smallpage's announcement that he intended to retire on the first of January. This necessitated a reorganization of the firm. Obviously George Patterson, as an original partner, had a lien on the offices and the good-will of the law business. To accept George's offer and continue as a new firm under the style of Patterson & Randall would be the easiest—the most natural course. Oliver, should he separate from his partners, could hope to carry away with him only a small percentage of the clients—some of those whose affairs he had personally conducted. At the same time, he had always purposed to strike out for himself some day, and, if he were ever to do so, the moment seemed to have arrived. Had the decision rested simply with him, Oliver was conscious that he would have chosen the easier way. But by uniting with George it was clear he would disappoint Mary. She set store by his ambition that his name should head his firm, and there was her antipathy for Nettie Patterson to be reckoned with besides—a good soul, but disposed to spoil George, he must admit. They were a middle-aged, easy-going couple; and he was not prepared to deny that she was in some measure responsible that her husband, a keen practitioner at the outset, was beginning to display more interest in the profits of his profession, which enabled him to enjoy life, than in the fine points of the law.

Oliver did not conceal from Mary the arguments in favor of remaining where he was. Without laying undue stress on them, in justice to his original plan that he should be the founder of his own fortunes and her disrelish for the lady in the case, he intimated that com-

mon sense and prudence dictated an alliance with George. But he was swept off his feet by the certitude of Mary's vision.

"If you ever intend to break away, Ollie—and your heart has always been set on it—this is the moment. We women are guided by our intuitions concerning what is best for those we love, even though they conflict with risk-nothing cautiousness. But the point here, Ollie, is that you do risk nothing. Dame Fortune has played into our hands by providing my money at the very time when the chance we've been waiting for is presented. It's yours as much as mine, to keep or spend, and, thank Heaven, there's enough to bridge us over comfortably in case there should be a falling off at first in your income."

Although he pointed out that their aim should be to preserve the principal and spend only the income, Oliver accepted this exposition as conclusive. Mary's attitude might be improvident, but it was generous; it might be rash, but it was courageous. For the sake of what she conceived to be his ultimate advantage—and, if all went well, it might readily prove to be—she was eager to have him renounce a certainty. Could he afford to be less daring than she? She was bidding him be true to his ideals; and could he genuinely feel that a partnership with George Patterson satisfied them?

Oliver's better self thus encouraged, lost no time in clinching this decision. Barring accidents, it was the course he preferred. The reasons for the separation were from the tangible side so far vague that he did not attempt to make George—who was plainly puzzled—understand them. He was satisfied by avoiding a rupture and parting good friends. The step once taken, he was conscious of exhilaration. Thanks to his good angel—and he gave Mary the credit—he had succeeded

in doing what he always had intended. He found himself kindling with the incentive of being thrown wholly on his own resources. There could no longer be any excuse for supineness. The prodding now was from the spur of necessity; but he was free to test his own mettle, and there were no obstacles except those of his own limitations to impede his progress toward fame.

It was encouraging to Oliver during the next few months that his anticipations as to the amount of business he would attract were proved unduly modest. He had more than he could personally attend to from the start. While he scrupulously refrained from luring away the clients of the old firm, several of them came to him unsolicited, notwithstanding George Patterson had joined forces with a promising junior. At least two of his contemporaries, beginning to be prominent in their fathers' large affairs, consulted him in regard to new enterprises, for Benham's steady growth still afforded industrial opportunities which required prompt legal action lest they be missed. "If this activity continues," said Oliver to Mary at the end of the third month, "I shall have to take in a partner to help me out." He had started with a stenographer and an office boy. In addition at the moment he was keeping two students steadily employed.

Mary was serene and happy. Oliver's prowess was proving the soundness of her advice; but this was merely a detail. What gratified her was that her ship of matrimony seemed to be moving on an even keel with full-set sails which drew with just the combination of wind and weather requisite for swift, safe progress. The children were thriving. She was free from association with Nettie Patterson. Her domestic concerns were so efficiently and economically conducted that every one had enough to eat, but not too much. By the judicious

use of canned goods (and half of the time Oliver did not realize they were canned), the cooking was reduced to a minimum; this plan saved fuel and afforded both to the maid and herself more leisure for other occupations. And then suddenly one day—it was about a month after Oliver had begun on his own account—the unexpected happened; unexpected because she had never allowed herself to surmise that she had more than a bare chance of success. She was able to greet Oliver on his return home by waving a check for two hundred and fifty dollars in his face. Her design for a fountain had won the prize against a large field of competitors.

A few days later every one knew of this, for the announcement, with her picture (how it was obtained she had no conception) appeared in the newspapers. Congratulations poured in, and Oliver was stopped in the street by acquaintances who wished to tell him they had no idea his wife had such talents. It was friendly of Barbara to declare: "I could have told them; it's no surprise to me, dear." Mary tried to show herself becomingly modest, but she could not repress altogether a feeling of elation. Her design was to be perpetuated in metal immediately as one of the decorations of the new park. It gratified her that Oliver seemed suitably impressed by what was really a triumph, seeing that this was her first competition. She was even more gratified to have demonstrated the possession of latent capacities which would not merely have enabled her to earn her own living, possibly with distinction, had she been compelled to, but were the present means of an appreciable contribution to the family purse. As soon as the satisfaction of fingering the check wore off, she deposited it in the bank. She took pride in paying the few bills which were outstanding. The balance of the proceeds she decided to cherish as a nest-egg, a sort of

special fund in measure of her earning power—to which she hoped gradually to make additions.

These were happy days for Mary. But for her quiet hour, the daily respite acquired solely by her own contrivance, she could never have won the competition. Clearly it behooved her to continue to adjust her domestic affairs so that nothing should interfere with this. She had no idea of borrowing a leaf from Barbara's book, for the situation was totally different. But had she not already indicated what could be accomplished creatively by a married woman who prided herself at the same time (and above all) on the scrupulousness of her housekeeping?

Mary's prize winning served as an entering wedge to various semisocial activities. She was chosen a member of the Ceramic Club, a Benham coterie of aspirants in the crafts from both the sexes. Here were provided "shop talks" twice a month from November to May, with a preference for visiting foreigners as speakers who might be expected to correct native artistic deficiencies. A new broom is apt to sweep clean. At the first of these meetings which Mary attended the speaker, a convincing European, proved to be an enthusiast on everything Japanese. His thesis absorbed her, and not merely on the technical artistic side, for toward the close the scope of the address broadened into eulogy of their manners and customs in general. He referred to their reserve in matters of decoration, their taste in the blending of colors, their reverence for parents. As Mary listened, she almost gasped with approval at his tacit condemnation, by way of comparison, of the habit of kissing. The Japanese, he declared, not merely refrained from kissing; it never occurred to them to kiss. They regarded the habit as incongruous and distasteful.

It chanced that only a week previous the title of the

discussion topic at the meeting of the Maternity Club, all young mothers, and one of the inner groups of the Benham Woman's Club, had been "The Spread of Disease by the Osculatory Practice." She had returned home resolved to protect Martin and Christabel from promiscuous embraces, not excepting those of their father before he had made his toilet for dinner. This would require tact and vigilance on her part. But now to the peril of sporadic germs this suggestive lecturer had added inhibition based on a superior sanction. To preserve affection those who cared for each other should be demonstrative—she recognized the importance of this. But except for queer custom, were not the loving or solicitous speech and endearing gesture as eloquent as frequent contact of the lips? She enjoyed being fondled by Oliver, but might not the kiss on the mouth be more fitly reserved for moments of intensity? By stroking her hair or by looking deep into her eyes he could ordinarily give her equally well to understand that she was in his mind—that they were all in all to each other; this was the essential thing. If she craved more than this it would be easy to let her husband know. For the time being it seemed to Mary, as under the influence of this idea she contemplated her surroundings, that what she most craved was to be let alone; smiled at, approved of, fondled occasionally, but let alone. They were extremely happy. The children were darlings. Both she and Oliver were so fully occupied that the days were not long enough for all they wished to accomplish. It was highly desirable for both their sakes that she should not have another baby for a considerable time; that the likelihood of such an occurrence should be reduced to a minimum. It was rare now when Oliver did not bring home work for the evening; and not infrequently he sat late over his law papers. The

best proof of his devotion to her now was that he sometimes abandoned his pipe and worked at her side. She never urged him; the tribute was valueless unless spontaneous. She was reading now during her evenings extensively on art; there was a lending library of books and prints at the Ceramic Club. By way of being demonstrative on her side she had tried sitting in the den, but the smoke was too much for her; it permeated her garments so that they were redolent of it next day.

Then of a sudden this well-oiled machinery of marital life was thrown out of gear by another unlooked-for occurrence. Oliver after a business trip to Michigan returned ailing, and three days later was put to bed by the doctor's orders on the prediction that he had typhoid fever.

CHAPTER VI

THE prediction proved correct. "A well-defined case, I'm sorry to state. He is likely to be a very sick man. One can never predict positively the course of typhoid; but your husband has youth, strength, and an unimpaired constitution in his favor."

Doctor Norton's words were a compendium of answers to Mary's searching questions. "Doc" Ferguson, who had been sent for, had summoned him in consultation. She wished to ascertain the truth at all hazards; to avoid being misled and to shrink from nothing. This was typical of her. Yet her first emotion on realizing that Oliver was seriously ill had been the paralyzing fear that he might be taken from her. Her heart stood still with terror and anguish. Fate, like a black extinguisher, hung menacingly over her head; its impact would crush her to earth.

Instinctively she struggled to escape, summoning courage and her clear-eyed reason to her aid. Instead of the appalled wife who still refused to credit this dire invasion of her paradise, she found herself for an instant staring at the dread possibility of widowhood. She might be left desolate and the sole reliance of two fatherless children. A horrifying, a pathetic vision; but she would have to manage somehow; it would devolve on her not to let them starve; thank Heaven, if she kept her health they need not starve. She must nerve herself for whatever was in store for her. And in the next breath she was thinking that it devolved on her to nerve herself so that Oliver might be given every opportunity

to recover. She must stifle her emotions, suspend all thinking, or, rather, centre her mental powers on this. Happily she was executive both by nature and training; she knew how to carry out orders and to see that they were executed by others. She did not easily lose her head.

Having revealed this to the doctors, she hoped, by her pertinent inquiries and her calmness, she took for granted that she would nurse Oliver. But they forbade. She might help in the daytime if the symptoms were not grave, but the services of a trained nurse were indispensable. On second thought, Mary, though disappointed, recognized the reasonableness of the prohibition. She yearned to wear herself out at the bedside of her darling, but he might suffer through her lack of hospital training; besides the house must go on and the children be cared for. She could best serve by taking her turn at tending him, whenever this was permitted, and by saving her remaining energies for the new responsibilities already looming up. When the crisis was past, Oliver's convalescence would inevitably be slow. In the interval his business would be interrupted and their income cut off. In order to live they would have to fall back on her money. What a blessing it was there to use! But they must avoid encroaching on these resources more than was necessary. There might be subsequent misfortunes to provide for. Now that one bolt had fallen from the blue, who could forecast the future? Obviously it was her first duty, since she was forbidden to be his regular nurse, to guard him vigilantly and keep herself fit to step into the breach a little later.

But the next fortnight was a hideous nightmare. When it was over and Oliver pronounced out of danger, Mary believed that she had always felt sure he would

get well. Yet during the ordeal—when much of the time, despite her desire for occupation, there was nothing to do but wait—the vision of herself a widow with two children returned to her, and she found herself involuntarily making plans. Yet dry-eyed, wan, and very alert, when not actively employed or at his bedside, she took brisk walks to keep herself in condition.

Barring a relapse, it was plain that Oliver was on the road to recovery some time before she heard Doctor Norton's summing up: "A very thorough case of typhoid and I was glad to see him past the danger-point, but he was at no time what we call desperately ill." It would not be necessary for him to call again; Doctor Ferguson was well qualified to look after the patient. In the joy of the reaction of knowing that her husband was spared to her, Mary almost smiled in the teeth of their plight—the fact that Oliver lay there so miserably weak and helpless. Almost blithely she listened to "Doc" Ferguson's statement that his system was thoroughly exhausted, and that he must avoid all exertion. It would be months, so she heard, before he could think of business. With the lifting of the incubus of anxiety, her mind began to move in its customary channels. One of the first questions she put to the invalid after he began to take notice was as to the source of the fever. How had he contracted it?

Oliver was not sure; he suspected the water in a country town where they had passed the night; for he had drunk of this and Walter Price, his companion of the trip, who had taken beer instead, had escaped. "Strange water? You should have had it boiled," Mary murmured. "Yes, dear, it was stupid of me; especially as I preferred beer," he answered with a wry smile, half sportive, half melancholic. What he left unsaid was plain enough to Mary. He had abstained from

the beer out of deference to her wishes. He was heeding her admonition, made unequivocally yet without nagging, that however it might be with a bachelor, both the brains and the purse of a family man were the better for avoidance of such indulgence. It was sweet of him. Thus musing, Mary stooped and pressed her lips to his emaciated forehead. He had certainly lost a great many pounds. "You're a love, Ollie, and I appreciate your loyalty. Remember, though, that only boiled water is invariably safe."

She was moving about the house now with her former elasticity; humming snatches of song as she set things to rights. The trained nurse was to depart in a few days. Callers, Oliver's men friends, were beginning to ask to see the patient—Ham Ford, Walter Price, Everett Dean. "Doc" Ferguson had given orders that no one's stay was to exceed five minutes. She stood sentinel at the sick-chamber like a dragon, reappearing with a smile on her lips as soon as the time had elapsed. It amused her to detain Everett Dean in the hall for a moment, so eager did he appear through embarrassment to escape. Thus cornered, he broke forth into a panegyric on how important it was for the party that Oliver should become "fit" as soon as possible. He was a burly man with black, nervous eyes, and his speech, though blunt, was fluent when he recovered from his confusion. She ventured to insinuate: "It's agreeable to hear that my husband is such an important factor; but I fear he will be obliged for a long while after this to concentrate his energies on providing his growing family with bread and butter." To this came the enthusiastic reply: "The party won't let him sit idle long; it can't afford to. He's the likeliest man of his age in this section of the country. He'll be heard from some day; mark my words, Mrs. Randall. Well, good afternoon."

As he closed the front door behind him, Mary realized that so far as producing any effect by her admonition, she might as well have kept silent; and the consciousness was irritating.

Among the visitors was George Patterson also; this, considering what had occurred, struck Mary as very civil, though obtuse. He brought a mould of jelly. She made a point of being cordial. But as they talked it suddenly dawned on her that, apart from his wife, the reason why she had never liked him better was that his habitual attitude toward her sex was condescendingly jocose; and, if an attempt was made to raise the conversation to a higher level, he was surprised or amused. He seemed deliberately to avoid any serious topic in conversation with her. She could not resist the conclusion that both Everett Dean and he—each in his way—looked at woman from the same old-fashioned angle; the one riding roughshod over her if she interfered with his plans, the other making light of her by mendacious cajoleries. Here was where Oliver's comprehension of his wife as his peer, and his genuine respect for her, set him on a higher plane in all his relations with the feminine sex; no wonder his friends admired and looked up to him, for he was made of different clay. Nevertheless, was it not a wife's duty to make the best of her husband's friends and try to like them? Naturally they must all suffer when weighed in the balance with him.

Despite the babies, the house seemed very still after the nurse went away. Oliver still slept during a portion of each day and required now comparatively little tending. Mary was free to resume her quiet hour, and she sat down at her desk with an avidity born of premeditation. For, by a coincidence, forty-eight hours earlier she had received another letter from the house-builder

whose offer she had declined just prior to her engagement. He had read of her success and was complimentary regarding the design for the fountain. On the eve of erecting an apartment-house more ambitious than anything hitherto attempted by him, could he not induce her to furnish an architectural sketch for the façade and a set of plans for the interior? He specified a respectable sum by way of compensation and intimated that in matters of opinion he would be putty in her hands.

What could be more providential? The family income was at low ebb; here was a concrete opportunity to add to it. Ever since Oliver was out of danger Mary had been cherishing the intention of eking out their expenses by her own peculiar talent. The definite piece of work now provided was also suggestive. What they needed for the next year was ready money. She could afford to leave in abeyance her ambition for distinctively creative work, roused by her triumph in the competition, until such time as Oliver was on his feet again, and devote her attention to undertakings of a more commercial aspect like this offered by Mr. Mitchell. If the apartment-house filled up rapidly, why should she not be offered further employment in this line? If she were industrious, was there any reason why she might not have two sets of plans in process of elaboration at the same time? However this might be, it was clearly her duty as well as her pleasure to accept the builder's proposal and to let her friends understand that for the moment at least she was open to engagements as a woman architect.

Having despatched her reply to Mr. Mitchell, Mary brought out her portfolio, and set zealously to work. She had in mind a building which should attract the eye of the masculine house-seeker by its cheerful sym-

metry and that of his wife by its ingenious internal arrangements. Her own conceptions in this regard had received a fillip from her familiarity with the architectural journals and foreign prints borrowed from the Ceramic Club. She determined to keep the matter secret from Oliver for the present. Mary reasoned that in his present enfeebled condition, he might conjure up imaginary objections to worry him, or conceive that she was overtaxing herself because of his inability to support the household. It would be time enough later to enlighten and surprise him. Indeed the only grain of solace to be derived from "Doc" Ferguson's Cassandra-like statement that certain complications, unimportant in themselves, threatened to retard Oliver's recovery of strength for some time longer, was the mental picture of how delightful it would be (for both of them) if, having guided his steps on the occasion of his first walk, she were able, with a wave of her hand across the street, to ask: "What do you think of my handiwork?" This could not happen, of course, unless poor Oliver were housed for over a year, a deplorable and most unlikely contingency.

Mary was interrupted in this employment one afternoon a fortnight later by a visit from Henry Ives Thornton. After appropriate solicitude concerning Oliver, he congratulated her on her success in the competition. Such obvious talent should not lie fallow; what was she planning to do next? Thus encouraged, she made him her confidant and as she talked found her purpose swelling. In declaring that she wished her friends to know that she had become an architect, and hoped thereby to augment the family income, she refrained from any intimation that this was to be temporary. Her felicitous relations with her visitor prompted her to open her mind to him. It is rare, as she knew, though the aim of

every woman, that quondam lovers are reduced to the safe and serviceable footing of genuine platonic friendship. Yet with the aid of the visit to New York this had been accomplished in his case. She yearned to have Henry Thornton marry some attractive girl; and she believed that he would consult her on the subject. Meanwhile his almost fraternal friendliness made it easy to disclose to him Mr. Mitchell's offer and to enlarge on her artistic aims. Mary noticed that he listened attentively, with evident approval, yet also with a reflective air as if he were pondering something. His significant words, "I'm glad you told me; what you have said puts an idea into my head; and I may invite your assistance later," brought the color vividly to her cheeks. She had spoken artlessly; without a trace of ulterior purpose. By the light of what she now recalled, her confidences seemed almost barefaced. Yet, though she was well aware that he was projecting many miles from Benham in the neighborhood of one of the great lakes an immense summer establishment, a chateau with elaborate terraces and gardens, which according to rumor would rival in size and stateliness the finest of France and England, it had never occurred to her to think of herself in this connection. But why not? Though her cheeks burned, and she was fain to bite her tongue through dismay lest he suspect her of design, Mary could see no reason for balking at this new propitious opportunity. In the many features of such an extensive undertaking there would be room for a diversity of talents. What more natural than that he should wish to give "home talent" a chance in this or that field? Hers was a prentice hand; but were not all artistic workers beginners once? Though she lowered her abashed eyes, Mary thrilled with the import of his remark. At the risk of his believing that she had led

up to the subject, she refrained even from the semblance of hesitation to accept all which it held out. A few moments later when he rose to go he delighted her by adding, as if to cement what he had already let fall:

"I have in mind an Italian garden; something patterned on the Old World, with sun-dials, noseless garden gods, and that sort of thing; but with modern touches to give it originality. When the time comes I shall let you loose in it with *carte blanche* to experiment."

Though she had plumed herself at the time on her refusal of Henry Thornton, Mary had been rising in her own estimation ever since. And not merely because her discernment had been vindicated by her experience with Oliver, but on account of the steady appreciation in value of what she had discarded. The man whom she could have married had she not preferred another, the man whose attentions had left her cold because she loved some one else, was undeniably a person of growing importance in her community. Henry Thornton had been a part of her world ever since she could remember anything. Though not intimate until later, they had known each other as boy and girl. Their parents were social acquaintances and had lived a few blocks apart on the same street. The Thornton residence was the larger of the two, but Mary had been unaware, until about the time when she began her course at the Benham Art Museum, of the pecuniary contrast between the two families established by the intervening years. If her parents had commented on the fact in her presence, she had paid no heed to it. So far as appearances went, there was little to indicate to the day of his death that Phineas Thornton had become enormously rich. A tall, gaunt man with a long goatee, whose every-day garb was a frock coat, black string tie and slouch-hat, the favorite costume of self-respecting Benhamites of

his day, she regarded him, even after she heard that he had become wealthy, chiefly as a reputable patient of her father's, whose shrewd sayings were sometimes quoted at the dinner-table. But at the time she began to attend social festivities the true state of affairs was revealed to her by the sudden reappearance on the horizon of her own contemporary, a shy, nondescript youth, as she remembered him at fifteen, of whom in her own preoccupation she had completely lost sight. He was back from an Eastern college, and he brought with him the prestige, which then meant something to her for the first time, of having more money than he knew what to do with.

Now that he was cured, and she without a pang of regret at having refused him, she nevertheless found herself more appreciative of what he represented. She realized that there were definite advantages in being rich; and Henry Thornton was exceptionally rich. By the death of his father he had succeeded not merely to large possessions, but to a sphere of influence which by itself set him apart from his fellows. If he chose, he could have a finger in everything which concerned Benham.

In appearance Henry Thornton was a modern; a much more spruce and cosmopolitan-looking individual than his father. The paternal goatee had been replaced by a well-trimmed pointed beard, the paternal frock coat and black string tie by less severe attire. He was a graduate of a great Eastern college, had acquired some familiarity with two foreign languages, and journeyed round the world before settling down. His father's death, which had occurred not long after his return, had centred his attention at first on financial concerns, and it was not clear as yet what he aspired to be—a leader of affairs, or a devotee of sumptuous tastes. At

the time of his wooing he had appeared to Mary simply an eligible young man whose attentions flattered her, partly because his social demeanor, like his wardrobe, suggested elegance, partly because he was tagged wealthy. If he had disclosed his ambitions to her she had forgotten them. But the recent news that he was erecting a huge summer palace—his first evidence of self-assertion—had interested her until now merely because it promised to be more princely than previous mansions of its class. For his manifestation was imitative, not original. During the first absorbing years of her wedded life the world had been moving fast, and one conspicuous sign of the changing times was the building fever which possessed the rising generation of so-called magnates—the grandsons of Benham's pioneers—resulting from a desire to make their external conditions reflect the plethora of their bank accounts. Now that she was older and wiser, she promptly assigned Henry Thornton to this group of newly rich and powerful young men and took pride in his past devotion to her, and in her apparent success in making a friend out of a lover. But of a sudden he stood revealed to her in a new and exciting guise, that of a self-appointed patron. He had volunteered admiration of her work, and obviously he must believe that she had talent or he would never have invited her to experiment in the embellishment of a retreat intended to be a model of its class, and the general features of which were under the supervision of a landscape-gardener of national repute.

This unexpected broadening of her horizon of opportunity caused Mary to concentrate her energies still more closely on her work. Tantalizing suggestions apropos of sun-dials and garden imagery began to assert themselves. These quickened her imagination, but at the same time she sought to expel them ruthlessly except

so far as they could be serviceable in her sketch of the apartment-house façade. She was eager to complete this—complete it so satisfactorily that every one would inquire the name of the designer. In competing for the fountain she had used her maiden name in the sealed envelope accompanying the drawing. She intended to make a practice of this. She wished her work to be judged solely on its own merits; and her identity would be thus concealed from people who associated her simply with her husband. As soon as the builder's plans were finished she would ask permission to visit Henry Thornton's new domain. Necessarily she must inspect the surroundings and familiarize herself with the architectural plan. Though she was given a free hand, her contributions, however individual, must harmonize with and be subordinate to the central scheme. She was invited only to do isolated bits and should be on her guard that her head was not turned. A genuine artist must first of all be humble; and she hoped to prove herself one.

As Oliver's convalescence progressed, the household settled into certain habits favorable to his comfort, and especially conducing to many hours of sleep for him, by day as well as by night. Afternoon tea was made a brief festivity in the patient's room. The children came for their restrained but affectionate good nights. Then Mary would sit down beside the bed, to glean from the evening paper the items of interest to the sick man. Not infrequently he would fall into a doze while she was reading aloud. One night when this happened she slipped away, to escape the restlessness bred of the effort to keep unnaturally still in the presence of sleep. She wandered from room to room of her well-ordered house, thinking how happy she was in her surroundings, her children, and above all that her husband was no longer

in danger. Her cup of hot tea and two fingers of toast had refreshed her without dulling her brain, and all her emotions responded to her call with unusual keenness and vigor. She was eating very little now—far less than when Oliver had been with her at table. It amused her to contrast the stuffing process which he was undergoing by the doctor's orders with her own abstemious diet. Yet her food was ample for her nourishment. Her mind was delightfully clear, and her muscles elastic and not easily wearied.

She tiptoed into her husband's den, where she had adjusted his belongings, but had disturbed nothing. His pile of papers neatly arranged, his portfolio, his pipe awaited his coming. Happily it would not be long now before the cheery tenant would return. Mary had kept the windows open, and had shaken the curtains daily, and she could now detect only the faintest odor of stale tobacco. She had sharpened his pencils, refilled his ink-bottle and provided him with a new pen-wiper. These were moments for reflection, and she decided unreservedly that she was more than content not to have been born a man. She peeped into several of the envelopes on her husband's desk; one proved to contain briefs, which she skimmed through, but which were too technical to interest her; the other a printed list of the voters of the ward with pencil hieroglyphics after their names. She took down one of the law reports from the shelf and read the case from beginning to end. The reasoning of the court was lucid, she grasped it readily and agreed with its conclusions; but they struck her as self-evident. Why had legal minds taken so long to discover that this was justice?

Finally her peregrinations took her into Oliver's dressing-room. She had strayed there previously and had put his bureau in consummate order. The doctor

had encouraged the hope that in a few days now he would be able to walk, and as his bed was only next door (she was sleeping in the spare chamber and had given up her own bedroom to him) one of his first excursions would naturally be thither. Approaching his dressing-table where, as in the den, she had arranged everything neatly, but disturbed nothing, she instinctively applied a duster and in doing so found herself taking a fresh survey of his personal effects. She noticed again that his brushes were shabby and she resolved to buy him a new pair whenever Mr. Mitchell paid her. Excepting a photograph of herself, the only object apart from his toilet articles was a leather case which served him as a pocketbook. She had noticed it lying there at one of her former visits, and that it contained papers. As she lifted the case so that she might flick the surface of the bureau with her duster, a letter escaped and slipped to the floor. Glancing at the address, she saw that it was to her husband in a masculine hand which was familiar. But for the moment she could not identify it. Which of his friends had been writing him?

As she opened the case to replace the letter, Mary noticed that it was the only one. The other papers were palpably uninteresting; bills and various memoranda. Oliver, as was his wont, had removed the case from his pocket the night before he was taken ill. She examined the envelope again. It bore the postmark Rutledge, which she recognized as the city in another part of the State where her sister was employed as librarian. Who of Oliver's friends lived in Rutledge? Her curiosity thus piqued developed a new line of inquiry: What sort of letters did men write to each other? Here was an excellent opportunity to find out.

Mary hesitated. She was not in the habit of examining her husband's correspondence; but one feature of their

ideal relation was the absence of secrets between them. If Oliver were looking over her shoulder, he would be certain not to object. She would be entirely willing that he should read any communication addressed to her. Mary, self-convinced, was on the point of satisfying her curiosity when she was suddenly confronted by the thought—would a man feel justified in such an act under similar circumstances? Concerned, yet somehow ruffled, she compressed the flap of the envelope with her hand. She shrank from the idea of failing to live up to any code of honor which the male conscience imposed on itself. The next moment she found herself differentiating in audible words: "I'm not a man. Haven't I just been congratulating myself that I wasn't born one?"

Galvanized afresh by the plausibility of this antithesis, she feverishly opened the envelope, as if to forestall any importunate scruple, and began to read. "Dear Oliver," the letter ran. But she was puzzled by the context; and to make sure of not trespassing on the private affairs of some client whom she did not know, Mary turned the page to look at the signature. There it was, Walter Price, unmistakably clear and with a characteristic flourish. She wondered that she had failed to recognize the handwriting. And what was the subject of his long letter? An anonymous she; and evidently not Sybil. As she began again with absorbed attention, the blood rushed to her cheeks. "Oh," she murmured in horrified protest, as the true import dawned on her. "Oh! What an outrage!" she repeated as she grasped the full significance of what she read. There was no room for conjecture. He was explaining to Oliver that he had succeeded in buying off—by settling a sum of money on her—a woman with whom he had carried on clandestine relations prior to

his engagement to Sybil Fielding. He was casting her off by this means in order to become free, as he thought, to marry Sybil. He had apparently consulted Oliver as to the legal details of the separation, and this letter was to apprise him that the trade had gone through.

Mary was quivering with excitement and indignation. As she beheld herself in the mirror of the dressing-table she saw that she had become pallid. Whether or not she had yielded to an excess of curiosity, what a piece of good fortune that she had relied on her prerogative as a wife between whom and her husband there were no secrets! Oliver had not intended to tell her. He would defend his reticence on the score that as a professional confidence it was sacred; she realized this. Would he have kept Sybil in the dark and permitted her to marry Walter in total ignorance of his disreputable past—a past that trod on the skirt of the present—out of deference to some masculine standard of honor? She would not prejudge him. Yet now that she had unearthed the secret, was there any sure way of discovering? Except for his fever, she might never have known. And because of his condition she must put off discussing the matter with him. She must be silent though her swelling conscience seemed like to burst with its outrageous secret.

But meanwhile something must be done. Her frown of wan perplexity slowly yielded to a look of alertness, the badge of clear-sighted purpose. Repossessing herself of the letter, which in her disgust she had let fall on the bureau as something contaminated, she thrust it into her bosom. It was not possible to discuss the matter with Oliver without risk of agitating him. Well and good; Oliver's relation to the unsavory affair, after all, was secondary; that of an attorney. Much as she was shocked by what appeared to be his complicity, it

was incumbent on her to hear his defense before condemning him. But because she must be tongue-tied in his presence, why should Sybil be kept in ignorance any longer? There was no gainsaying the compromising facts; they were in Walter Price's own handwriting. Sybil should be told—told at once; and plainly the duty devolved on herself as a married woman and Sybil's closest friend. Then her own hands would be clean.

If, after learning the hideous truth, Sybil still chose to—Mary in her repugnance refrained from completing the hypothesis. "Of course she'll break it off," she said aloud. "She never would consent to hand over her freshness to a profligate. I have always distrusted Walter Price. Now I know."

CHAPTER VII

SYBIL could do as she saw fit, but she was entitled to the facts. Mary awoke next morning with a heightened belief that her first judgment was sound. Sybil had met Walter first and frequently at her house. He was intimate with Oliver and they were in a measure responsible for him. Sybil might justly claim, if she learned the truth only after her marriage, that she had the right to take for granted that her two friends knew nothing detrimental to his character. To seal one's lips on the specious ground of reluctance to interfere would be the easier, the conventionally decorous course, but Mary repelled it as craven. The responsibility was disagreeable and demanded moral courage; but for an enlightened friend, who saw clearly, there was no solution under the circumstances but frankness.

Oliver could not be spoken to at present; he must be spared excitement. This simplified the situation for the moment. As she revolved it preparatory to action, Mary tucked away her concern as to his apparent toleration if not complicity behind the reflection that it might not be necessary ever to tell him. All that would be requisite by way of explanation was that Sybil had learned the discreditable truth about Walter and had broken the engagement. But of course this would postpone the soul-to-soul talk between Oliver and herself which was inevitable; for one of the tacit bonds between her and him, as she had understood, was their mutual disapproval of a different sexual standard for men and

women as one of the complacent fallacies of a masculine-made code of civilization.

She must have the matter out with Oliver some day whether or not she told him that she had read his letter from Walter. But her immediate duty eliminated him completely except for the consideration of his personal honor. She must protect this so that it should clearly be made to appear that he had not betrayed his friend; a man's point of view to be sure. Yet, though she conceived it to have been Oliver's part no less than her own to acquaint Sybil with the facts, she was ready to assume the entire onus, seeing that he could not be consulted, and thus avoid placing him in what he would be certain to regard as a false position.

This meant that she must read Sybil the letter, for a mere statement would possess the disadvantage of leaving a loophole for doubt and cast suspicion on Oliver as the source of her knowledge. She had arrived at this conclusion before seeking out Sybil. The appointment to call on her had been made by telephone. Primed as she was to speak, Mary faltered, and for an instant found herself challenging the wisdom of the proceeding as less indisputable than she had supposed. But she put aside her scruples as remnants of a false sensitiveness.

"Sybil dear. I have something important to tell you. It will distress you; but to keep silent concerning what I have discovered by accident would not be the conduct of a friend."

Thereupon Mary, after a few words of explanation as to how it had slipped out of the pocketbook, and she had chanced to open it, put the letter into Sybil's hands saying: "Perhaps you had better read this after I've gone."

It was plain from Sybil's expression that she had divined that the important information concerned

Walter. The care-free, naïvely self-conscious gaiety of the girl soon to be married vanished; she listened mutely and, as it seemed to Mary, cowering like one waiting to receive a blow. But despite the suggestion of her mentor, she perused the contents of the letter at once. Accustomed to correspondence all her life, Sybil was of those who can grasp the full purport of a letter by what to the onlooker seems a glance. So swiftly did she turn the page and reach the signature that it seemed incredible she had read every word as she raised her eyes to meet Mary's. But there was no mistaking either the mortification or the anger of which they were the medium. If she had put her thoughts into words, Mary would have said it was a revelation to her that Sybil Fielding possessed so much spirit. The orbit of her eyes had grown larger and their gleam almost fierce. If she had not been a woman whose pride had been wounded, she might have been an irate panther. And there was a deep flush in spite of the nearly olive skin. But only for a moment. Then the intensity and the signs of anger faded and she became her abnegating self plus something which seemed to mimic perilously near the humor of the gods. She positively laughed—a wry, ironic laugh—and after an ejaculation in Italian which Mary recognized as an apostrophe to fate, said:

“This means it's all over, doesn't it?”

If there was a little sore spot of contrition marring Mary's self-esteem, she salved it by replying: “That's for you to decide, dear.” She added in behalf of righteousness: “He has treated you shamefully, of course.”

Sybil nodded, but it was evident that she was absorbed by some other phase of the situation. After an instant she said almost furtively: “I wonder if she is very attractive. I suppose you haven't seen her?”

"The—er—woman he is discarding?" Mary disclaimed the possibility with surprise that bordered on horror. "I know nothing whatever except what Mr. Price writes in the letter."

"I wouldn't mind so much if he had told me."

Mary listened indulgently, for it was obvious that this was preliminary.

"But it must have been going on all the while he—" In biting her lip so that the tears should not overflow, Sybil left the sentence unfinished. They were the tears of mortification, and in sympathy with them Mary leaned forward and tenderly stroked the unoccupied hand. "You poor dear, I'm nearly heart-broken over you. I scarcely slept a wink last night."

"I shall break the engagement, of course."

"I supposed you would, dear."

There was a pause. Then Sybil said: "If I cared so very, very much, I should ask him to explain—though it is in his handwriting. Other women have married men who had—er—favorites and been happy. Europe is full of them and I've no reason to think that our women, when it comes to the point, are much more exacting."

Mary could not let this pass unchallenged. "We intend to be in future," she interposed. "That's the key-note of present-day social reform."

It did not seem requisite to Sybil either to affirm or deny this. She wore the melancholy, wistful air, as she continued, of one in the act of destroying old love-letters. "I liked Walter; it's a disappointment to have to give him up—and a mortification; but it's not a case of caring desperately. I was marrying him, as you very likely divined, partly because it seemed the easiest thing to do. So I can look the matter squarely in the face—er—without flinching. He has affronted me—angered

me, as you see—and I wouldn't marry him after what I know for anything."

"He was never half good enough for you," murmured Mary. It puzzled her, however, that Sybil would have forgiven the moral turpitude more readily had her affections been more deeply involved. To her own way of thinking, intensity of feeling should have increased the sense of outrage. But Sybil's decision appealed to her tenderest sympathies. It was what she would have done herself without the slightest hesitation from sheer repugnance. But she could appreciate better than before her marriage that a grosser nature might be tempted to put up with the delinquency on the excuse that it was over and done with rather than renounce the material benefits which marriage would assure. Poor Sybil would be thrown back on the world—on the harassing necessity of earning her own living, for which she was none too well fitted. Not to break off her engagement would be behaving unworthily; yet Mary felt herself aglow with emotional approval of a moral crisis sturdily faced.

"It's everything hateful and galling now, Sybil darling," she cried. "But you're behaving like a trump. My heart bleeds for you; yet I'm glad, truly glad for your sake. It leaves you free for some one worthy of your sweet devotion and trust. And it won't be long before he appears on the scene."

Then to her own astonishment Mary found herself under the spur of one of those contrary impulses which she had learned to associate with weakness so unexpectedly did they assert themselves, and saying: "You're not sorry that I told you, Sybil? You would not have had me keep silent and let you marry Walter?" Yet she flushed as she spoke, for the last thing she really wished was to impugn the certitude of her own judgment.

It was clear from Sybil's look of interrogation that she had not considered this alternative. "You mean—if I need never have known?" For an instant there was a perceptible shadow of hesitation as if she were toying with hope or grasping at a straw beyond her reach. Then with a positive shake of the head she replied: "No; he might have gone back to her some day; and—and I should have been sure to discover it sooner or later."

Once more Mary detected a gleam of anger. The thought which lingered in her mind as she took her departure and persisted as the one strange—and from her own point of view unsatisfactory—feature of the interview was that Sybil's wrath was concerned not with the evil of the illicit relation, but with the personal element; the pseudo-rivalry between her and one who ought to be instinctively banished from the mind as unfit for a second thought. As she rehearsed the scene in retrospect, she could not escape the conviction that the predominant motive of the rupture had been pique not indignation, and that the act had been wrapped in a sort of moral fog which had tarnished the lustre of the shining deed. It did not occur to her at the moment to think of this as the survival of a feminine trait old as human nature itself. She sought the cause in Sybil's upbringing and vagrant foreign experiences.

It was not long after this that Oliver and she thrashed out the ethics of the broken engagement. Thrashed it out to differ; though not in terms. Oliver did not undertake to maintain that any other course was open to a pure-minded girl like Sybil, or to question the propriety of her own interference. But he left much to be desired by means of what he did not say—by insinuation even. It would be impossible for her to feel henceforth, whatever his protestations, that they took the same view

of sexual irregularities. Their conversation had demonstrated that each approached the subject from a different angle.

Reflection had convinced her that it would be a mistake to let Oliver learn the news from any other source. He might misconstrue silence as an attempt to conceal her part in the painful affair. She broke to him in a few comprehensive sentences the exact story on the day before he returned to his office, in the evening after he had relished his dinner. He listened in silence like one rooted to the spot, but his expression was eloquent of astonishment, dismay, and perturbation. His most poignant words were his first, uttered with surprise which contained a touch of harshness, as if he refused to credit his ears.

"You opened my letter and read it? What right had you to do so?" He looked stern, almost savage.

This, then, was the chief offense; not her revelation to Sybil. She had her answer ready; spoken with complete good faith; she had many times rehearsed it.

"I never received a letter, Ollie, which you were not welcome to read. I consider you at liberty to read all my letters." Was it not written between the lines of their marriage compact that there were to be no secrets between them?

Frowning, he replied: "But this was privileged. A special confidence intrusted to me; something he wished no one else in the world to know."

"I was not cognizant of that. It fell out of your pocketbook while I was dusting; the envelope was open. But having chanced on the knowledge, could I let Sybil marry in utter ignorance of the ghastly truth?"

"Perhaps not." His expression was a little dogged, but troubled.

"If you face the situation squarely, it's clear as crys-

tal that I had to tell her; I was her intimate friend." She paused an instant, then put the searching question she was longing to ask: "Answer me this, Ollie, and think before you answer; if I hadn't found out, would you have felt justified in keeping Sybil entirely in the dark?"

His answer was slow in coming; he colored as he spoke. "It was a professional secret."

She gasped, for the reply, because of what seemed to her its paltriness, was virtually an equivocation. "That was the excuse given by the doctor in the case they told me about in New York. Knowing that a patient whom he had treated for a dreadful disease was not fit to marry and was engaged to a lovely girl, he cautioned the young man, but when the caution was disregarded, the doctor failed to warn the girl's father. He let them marry, declaring that his lips were sealed by professional courtesy. And the consequences were simply——"

He cut her short. "For Heaven's sake, Mary, don't let's drag what doesn't exist into this case. I'm not standing up for Walter. It's a hideous mix-up at the best. But he had cut loose from what's her name. The letter made that clear. And I'm positive he has had nothing to do with her since the engagement. He intimated as much to me himself. I'm not surprised at Sybil's decision to throw him over; the discovery must have been a cruel shock. But Walter is merely in the same category as thousands of men with whom other girls, left in the dark, have married and lived happily. As such men go—and apart from this—Walter is a good fellow."

"Oh, surely. That parrot-like pernicious phrase!"

He had barely finished ere her caustic comment brought the color again to his face, in token that this specific testimonial was not well chosen.

"And if the statistics we hear about as being privately circulated are true, scores of them instead of living happily have been utterly wretched because of that libertinism concerning which they were left in ignorance. Well, this one knows, thank Heaven, and she has chosen for herself." Pausing a moment, Mary added: "Sybil seemed curious as to the woman's personal appearance; asked if she was attractive."

"I've never seen her. I didn't know of her existence until the other day." Oliver's words were rather indignant, as if to challenge her grounds for imagining such further complicity.

"You misunderstood me completely, dear. I never supposed for an instant that you had known her. I was merely calling your attention to Sybil's attitude, which struck me as a trifle *pèculiar*."

"Oh." Oliver's face relaxed. He realized that his injured innocence had jumped too hastily. He looked a little foolish and as their eyes met they laughed in unison at the grotesqueness of the blunder. But for her the situation still remained essentially solemn, if not tragic. "I've no doubt it was as dreadful a surprise to you as it was to me when you first heard it," she continued, eager to make further amends, for though her husband had failed to manifest that pitch of righteous indignation and that enthusiasm for her zeal which pre-matrimonial meanderings around this painfully absorbing theme had led her to expect, she yearned to reassure herself that his reserve was due mainly to sex loyalty, and that they were not fundamentally far apart.

She had her reward; she heard him say in an unequivocal tone: "Walter's a loose liver; I don't stand for that as you very well know. When we sift this out, he has brought his misfortune on himself." Then

with an upward jerk of the chin, which she associated with his determined moods, he continued: "But, as you said just now, the matter was up to Sybil, and she has decided. The fat's in the fire. There was nothing more, I see, which we could do—except discuss it. And that we've done."

Plainly he was putting the subject from him, was bored or at least anxious to get rid of it—Mary could see that. Though he spoke urbanely and with matter-of-fact finality, it was easy still to detect that he harbored some reserve. Mary, marking him, divined that the residuum which rankled was his annoyance that she had tampered with his letter. He would get over this; presently perhaps see the delinquency, if it were one, in its true light. As for the larger subject, Oliver was right—there was no use in discussing it further at present. All things considered, the upshot of their dialogue was at the worst negative. Indeed in the end Oliver had agreed with her in so many words. She was disillusionized in some measure in that she was disappointed; but nothing had occurred between them which would stand in the way of bringing up the whole topic again later, after Oliver had had time to digest his especial grievance.

Typhoid fever like maternity often proves a physical purifier in the long run. When at last Oliver resumed his normal activities, he felt himself a new man. That sluggishness which had found house-room with his less worthy self had disappeared. The alertness of his movements kept pace with the keenness of his appetite. There was obviously a tremendous incentive in being out of pocket the better portion of a year's income. He must strain every nerve to re-establish his suspended law practice and make up for lost time. But he was conscious besides of a certain freshness

of point of view which vitalized his mental outlook. He felt maturer, more aware of what his opportunities were and eager to take advantage of them. He recognized with more discerning eyes that Benham was in the throes of one of those successive stages in its rapid growth when what had lately seemed permanent or massive was being torn down or discarded; when methods adequate for the fathers were pronounced hopelessly dilatory, and real estate in outlying territory was advancing by leaps and bounds to meet the sudden demand for modern business facilities. The new generation was in the saddle and he was one of them. Reorganized business methods and modern business facilities were the harbingers, so far as he was concerned, of legal complexities which reduced the litigation of practitioners not yet elderly to the scale of miniature warfare. The services of the law were in demand to unite between breakfast and dinner by a few succinct paragraphs millions of productive capital; and he who was equal to the emergencies of the hour must be able to cleave the casques of his adversaries by the use of injunctions no less summarily and deftly than the knight of old by his sword. He must be ever vigilant, resourceful, and tireless, and if when he rode from the jousting with an unbroken lance, his strength was as the strength of ten, it would be because his heart was pure—proof against the lure of craft and sharp practice.

Oliver found that his office force had kept his matters in such shape that he was called immediately into the thick of the fray. His two law students on whom responsibility had been prematurely thrust had proved themselves, as frequently happens, equal to the occasion. Here was the nucleus for a rising firm—the sort of firm of which he was emulous to be the head. There were cases ready for trial, and almost before he had

settled himself at his desk to refresh his memory concerning facts and precedents, some of his contemporaries who had promised to give him business dropped in to congratulate him on his recovery and retain his services. For the first thirty days it was in the air that any one in need of a lawyer would perform an act of charity and get a good return for his money by employing young Randall, whose recovery from typhoid fever had been so protracted. And some of those who set this ball rolling accelerated it by adding:

"They say his wife—she's the Mary Arnold, you know, who did the fountain for the new park—kept the house running while he was ill by designing houses for an architect. She must have plenty of pluck as well as cleverness. Now it's his turn; give him a chance."

If the tag to this eulogy suggested a shade of masculine merriment evoked by the notion of a wife turning breadwinner while her husband lay sick abed, Oliver never became a party to it. While granting that Providence had been kind in supplying his wife with an inheritance at this crucial moment—he disliked to be obliged to encroach on it; and he was looking forward to the day when he would be able to pay back every cent. But of Mary's prize-money—her pin-money, so he thought of it—he was egregiously proud. He had no scruples whatever on the score of her contributing this to the family pot, so far as it would help out, and he sympathized with her pleasure in feeling that she was momentarily changing places with him. He enjoyed giving her cleverness due credit in telling how she had stepped into the breach. At the same time he took for granted that her pecuniary assistance was an episode peculiar to the stranded situation in which he had found himself, and that her major activities would presently cease. Or, more correctly perhaps, he assumed this without formulating it because

he had become so preoccupied by the pressing demands upon him down-town that for the six months following his return to the office his thoughts, perforce, ran in a single channel. He left the house earlier than ever before in the morning, he never returned until late in the afternoon, and he ordinarily brought home with him a portfolio of documents which not infrequently absorbed his attention until late at night.

He occasionally apologized to Mary for this assiduity; but what could he do? New business had come to him with a rush and must be disposed of promptly in order to invite more. Far from demurring, it was clear that she understood he was endeavoring to make up for lost time and was gratified by his rapid progress. He was agreeably conscious while he worked that she was occupied. With what he did not know precisely. Sometimes she was drawing; more frequently reading. She seemed busy and serene. He knew that Henry Thornton had commissioned her to decorate his Italian garden, and that the builder Mitchell, pleased by her designs for his new apartment-house, which was half-way up, had given her another order. When his affairs did not require the handling of the law reports in his den, he often worked beside her. He could see that she was gratified if he did. Under the pressure of the moment—he meant his absorption to be temporary—it was sufficient to feel that she was contented and did not begrudge the loss of companionship or variety in her evenings. One night when they had worked in close proximity for over two hours without exchanging a word, happening to catch his eye as she looked up, she murmured happily: "We've had a splendid evening, haven't we! Busy as two bees."

Recalled from the realm of law in which he had been completely lost, he rose and stretched himself like one

awakening; then stooping, laid his cheek against hers. "Honey-bees, too. What's all this?" he inquired curiously, as he surveyed her work-table and took notice for the first time that it was crowded with large books of architectural prints wide open, save for the space just below her hands on which lay several loose sheets of cardboard covered with artistic pencillings.

"Oh! experimenting for the Thornton garden. I'm just browsing—feeling my way toward something original, with these folios on English and Italian landscape imagery to inspire and enlighten me. They discourage one also, for everything beautiful—yes and ugly, too—seems to have been thought of already. But I hope I've evolved something to-night," she continued wistfully, "which may do when I've worked it over."

As she spoke Mary raised one of the sheets of cardboard and held it out at arm's length. "Guess what it is."

"A—er—the thing they grow vines on abroad—a pergola."

"Bravo! Only partly done, of course—just a rough sketch to fix the idea."

"It's a stunning idea, as I look at it; ought to win another two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar prize at least when it's finished."

"But this isn't for a prize, Ollie. If Henry Thornton accepts it, it might lead to all sorts of things—if I choose to let it."

"But you mustn't choose to let yourself work too hard. It's bedtime."

As she looked up at him in challenge of what sounded like a touch of condescension he stroked her hair and added:

"And still they gazed and still the wonder grew
That one small head could carry all (*she*) knew."

"Adapting Goldsmith, Ollie, on top of the pergola! You are revealing unexpected stores of culture to-night."

"You've always exaggerated the deficiencies in my education. Compared with you I'm an ignoramus; but I did learn a few things at college after all."

Despite the persiflage, he spoke as if glad of the opportunity to say just this. But Mary ignored the charge.

"It doesn't hurt either a healthy man or a healthy woman to work hard," she said. "There's nothing I'd rather do than this," holding out her new design again at arm's length for her own inspection, "and the time just flies. Besides, we're at the top of our powers."

Her husband echoed her words: "We're at the top of our powers, and—and life is short. It's time to go to bed." He drew her to her feet with a compelling grasp, and turning her face kissed her on the mouth.

Mary removed her lips with the recoil of one whose mood has been interrupted, and without eluding his embrace freed herself sufficiently to stoop and tidy her drawing-table. "Yes, it's horribly late and—and we both need to go to sleep." What was evidently in his mind was not in hers. How peculiar men were. Only a few minutes before they had both been sitting mutely rapt in intellectual effort—each in a separate vein—he engrossed by a vital workaday problem, she essaying to create. Could one so swiftly be separated from the spell of such occupation and not be conscious of discord?

As she stood up to go she felt him clasp her anew. She became suddenly conscious, and a little proud of his strength. She could not repulse his endearments without wrenching herself from those powerful arms or being disagreeable. The intrusion was complete, for the spell of her mood was broken; besides he was her husband—in one sense still perhaps her lord and master.

He was seeking her lips again. Turning, she kissed him fervently of her own accord—the signal reserved for great occasions. She put her arms around his neck. Sweeping back his hair from his brow, her favorite gesture of pride of possession—she looked into his eyes and said: “You’re a darling whether you’re illiterate or not.” She was content after all, and she was behaving very well. He answered her stricture by a fond hug and extinguished the lights. As shoulder to shoulder they went lover-like up the stairs the thought was in her mind: “I might have fourteen children and it would still be the same. If anything should happen so soon to tie my hands, I could not bear it.” She was preparing to say as much diplomatically to Oliver.

CHAPTER VIII

OLIVER's freshness of point of view emanating from his cure, was not confined to the law. He had returned to his office with every intention of devoting himself strictly to professional work. But though no one sought for a time to interfere with this purpose, he found himself unable to shut his eyes to what was occurring in politics, which had become exceptionally stirring during his convalescence.

In the State of which Benham was the chief city, both in population and importance, the margin between victory and defeat for either of the two great political parties had been for a generation so narrow that the balance of power might be said to depend ordinarily on quasi-local conditions. Yet every issue when more closely examined was found to be a reflex of currents national in their origin and scope. The State was such close fighting ground that party feeling ran inordinately high and any election was likely without apparent warning to approximate a convulsion. At the same time the shrewdest participant could not afford to be too confident in forecasting results, for the subtle advance growth of some new political movement, especially one which involved a change in the public conscience, was liable to be the determining factor at the polls.

Those most devoted to the game of politics were not always cognizant of this—even when it happened. After the cat had jumped it was easy to discern reasons for ascribing the results to the victor's magnetism or

his rival's inability to "deliver the goods." In the sight of those closest to the fray, especially if young and ardent, the personalities of the leaders and the astuteness of the ways and means employed were likely to overshadow the principles at stake. So it had been with Oliver Randall. He knew in a general way what his party stood for, but his loyalty during his apprenticeship—and he was a strong partisan—had taken the form of diligent attendance at ward meetings and industrious supervision of caucuses. Victory for him meant the triumph of the party ticket, the unexceptionable individuals nominated at the convention—and in particular the discomfiture of Steve Bartlett, the ward boss of the opposition, in his eyes an arch-villain of Machiavelian type and unscrupulous methods. His own side was enormously in the right; consequently the other side must be egregiously in the wrong. And could anything prove this more convincingly than the tabulated returns on election day?

But one result of a year's growth was a sudden interest in measures rather than men and a disposition to analyze their significance. A political campaign ceased to shape itself as an acrimonious struggle between the cohorts of two overexcited partisans, and appeared a battlefield involving the fate of vital principles, where the opposing candidates were simply color-bearers. Instead of accepting the party platform on trust—frequently without actually reading it—as an irreproachable and irrefutable document, Oliver now saw in it an exposition of faith on which he could stand firmly with both feet and regarding the phraseology of which he had become passionately jealous. To his newly spiritualized vision sundry issues defined themselves with compelling clearness. Their triumph was essential to the social well-being of the community, and

in order that they should prevail it was imperative that the services of the strongest men whom the party could muster should be invoked to carry the flag.

There is so much necessarily drab in the political contests of democracy, so much which offends the nostrils of the fastidious and makes the smug or the judicious grieve, that we are apt to forget that nature is still prolific of ingenuous youth and has not lost the mould which produces men on whom a righteous cause has the grip of steel and to whom it is dearer than the breath of life. At the same time there were concrete causes which helped to brighten and readjust Oliver Randall's perspective and to awaken his latent enthusiasm. And the concrete causes, as usual, were quasi-local. This was the year before the presidential election, an off year in a political sense; yet public opinion was at fever heat over a State-wide controversy.

There are times in our latter-day history when the native observer of current events no less than the foreigner is put to his wits to define the difference between the two great parties in more precise terms than that one is in power and in possession of the offices, and the other not. Times when the once fundamental antagonism between the growth of federal centralization and the integrity of States' rights seems defunct as the dodo, and even the tariff, that low-lying reef of perpetual discord, is for the hour submerged. Times when both sides claim to be protagonists and promoters of every social panacea on the horizon of human hope, and vie with each other in drawing up prospectuses of the same attractions in a fashion resembling the competition of two rival mammoth circuses on the bill-boards.

Yet at these periods there are differences of presentation and emphasis, potent in their effect on the individual temperament to invite or repel; and so con-

verts are acquired. Oliver had made his choice shortly after becoming of age on the strength of a prospectus which summoned the young men of the country to rally around the standard of the party prepared to blaze the highway of prosperity with one hand and cleanse the Augean stables of incompetency with the other. The second of these hoary metaphors had appealed to his sensibilities with peculiar force because of its timely aptness. During the régime of the opposition party in control of the State offices certain pertinent and sorry disclosures had demonstrated the administrative departments of the government—like those which dealt with the finances, the supplies, and the wards of the State—to be sadly in need of overhauling. The evidence showed not merely that the system in operation was hopelessly antiquated, but that in the recesses and under the eaves of these modern Augean stables lurked festering abuses wholly inconsistent with the philanthropic professions of those who held the reins of power, whose watchword was the protection of the common people.

It was too much to expect of Oliver at this early stage of his political experience the discrimination that the two parties had alternated in their control of the State government during the previous decade and that the responsibility charged against one of them was shared really by the whole community. There was no doubt, however, about the fervor and genuineness of the ensuing reaction. It was a crusade. The opposition was swept out of office by a wave national in its movement, on the crest of which bristled the solidifying formula "government by commission." It was the vitality of this doctrine which had kept Oliver's party in power during the years of his novitiate. This was the club which had frustrated the machinations of

Steve Bartlett and crowned the labors of Everett Dean. And the special hero in his eyes of the succession of party victories had been Governor Trowbridge, the capable, magnetic head of the ticket, whose eloquence had carried the day and whose series of constructive measures had brought departmental order out of chaos and redeemed the proud State from well-earned reproaches. It was easy to throw up his hat for such a man—a martial-looking figure on the platform, with iron-gray hair, and already talked of for vice-president. It had been easy too for Oliver, after the first fervor of taking sides to settle down into the condition of a tireless and uncritical henchman. For in the interval the other incentive held out to patriotic young men to join the party had been abundantly realized. The community of which Benham was the commercial centre had continued to thrive amazingly, affording golden opportunities to those who put their trust in American industries.

During Governor Trowbridge's term—he held office for three successive years—the legislature had enacted in substance the reforms outlined by his inaugurals. The laxity which had necessitated such vigorous house cleaning had been replaced by a system which divided and yet fixed responsibility. He was succeeded by Guy Bonner, a man not yet forty and well qualified by his personal characteristics to rally the young men around him. He announced before election a continuation of the business policy which had distinguished the party's activities under his predecessor, and made the slogan of the canvass which landed him in the governor's chair the establishment of a board of public utilities—the placing of the several public-service corporations, street railways, gas, electric light, and telephone companies, the control of which had hitherto been scattered and ineffective, under a single tribunal invested with large powers.

This projected legislation, though the programme of one who read correctly the signs of the times, aroused antagonism within the party by alienating certain interests averse to any change which would strengthen the hands of the police power and render their financial ends more difficult of attainment. Was not each of the several branches of the public service under ample control already? Would it not be well for a party which had so recently accomplished such radical reforms to let well enough alone? It so happened that this was the issue in the year before Oliver was stricken with typhoid fever. Those hostile to the establishment of a board of public utilities endeavored to prevent the nomination of Governor Bonner in the convention and subsequently laid their wires to compass his defeat at the polls.

Apart from the merits of the political measure involved, Guy Bonner had the advantage in Oliver's eyes of being the young men's candidate—doubly so through having risen rapidly from the ranks by the efforts of a little group of embryo politicians to which Oliver himself belonged. Everett Dean had taken to Bonner, and picked him out for one of the minor municipal offices. Later he had been elected to the legislature, where he had demonstrated so signally his capacity for leadership that he had been triumphantly "boomed" for speaker, during Governor Trowbridge's term. When that official retired from office no time was lost in asserting Bonner's claim to lead the party to victory. Though there were those who urged that he should bide his time until others who had served the party loyally when he was in the cradle had been rewarded, he had pulled through at the convention by a comfortable margin on the strength of the plea that the young men demanded a leader who was abreast of the times; and then Oliver had set his teeth to frustrate the unholy alli-

ance between Steve Bartlett and the money-grubbing traitors in his own party. It was on the eve of this candidacy when Everett Dean and he were putting their heads together and counting noses for the primaries, that he had let Mary go without him to New York to see the production of Barbara Ford's play.

The passage of the bill creating a board of public utilities had followed closely in the wake of Governor Bonner's inauguration. This reform was the feature of his first year of office; the party had redeemed its pledges and, whatever its adversaries might say, had proved itself the promoter of true progress. So it seemed certainly. But events move so rapidly nowadays that the political pioneer of yesterday may readily be made to appear the reactionary of to-morrow. A small cloud arose on the horizon just before the legislature adjourned in the shape of a popular demand for safety appliances on the railroads. It was claimed that the lives of employees were constantly imperilled by the lack of suitable safeguards, and that the State ought to require comprehensive improvements. On the other hand, so meritorious but so sweeping a reform would entail large expenditures by the corporations affected. A rational disposition of the matter would be to indorse the broad policy by an appropriate resolution and leave the specific remedies to the new board of public utilities. It seemed exactly germane to the purpose for which this board had been created.

This view of the party in power killed an attempt to secure belated consideration of a bill, for the introduction of which unanimous consent was necessary at this stage of the session. But the so-called popular demand endured, and by the time the issues for the autumn campaign were framed the small cloud was found to have assumed large and threatening proportions. Gov-

ernor Bonner was re-elected. No sooner had the legislature defeated the party introduced the bill than the railroad companies introduced a bill to complete before the session. This bill became the centre of an exciting session. So strong was the opposition behind it that it was issued from committee with the commendation of a majority, which necessitated the votes of three members of the dominant party. The debate in both branches was fierce and prolonged. Rumor declared, and this was repeated on the floor of the house, that the public corporations of the State were expending large sums in a nefarious endeavor to stem the tide of humanitarian justice. It was urged in retort that the bill was the product of popular hysteria and that the sober business sense of the community would condemn the treatment of such a wide-reaching measure in so ill-considered a fashion.

The bill passed; passed by a margin of fifteen owing to division in the ranks of its enemies, some of whom conceived that the popular impulse was too strongly indicated for them to ignore it; and was promptly vetoed by Governor Bonner. In an unequivocal and ringing message he set forth the distinction between hostility to a reform and repugnance to the methods employed to attain it. If justice for both sides was sought, the logical, the only statesmanlike course, was to permit the recently organized expert body to work out the complicated problem by the light of what other communities were doing.

Governor Bonner's veto was coincident with Oliver's convalescence; the burning topic of the hour at the moment of his return to his office. He kindled with the utter unreasonableness of the exigency and the courage of the official repudiation. As he pointed out at every

opportunity, there was no difference as to the merits. His party's sympathy with the desired reform was just as sincere as that of their critics. Both sides were aiming at exactly the same result; but the distinction was that the advocates of the bill were ready to substitute popular clamor for systematic investigation. Fortunately they had had to reckon with a leader who refused to be stampeded. Oliver's enthusiasm for the head of the ticket kept pace with his ire. "It proves that we took his correct measure when we put Bonner in the governor's chair," he declared as he rehearsed the complication to Ham Ford. "We expected it of him, but it's inspiring to see a man stand up in his boots and crack his whip in their faces. The bill's dead. They can't pass it over his veto. The brutes will try, of course, to trample him in the dust next November, but we'll give them a run for their money."

Oliver's eyes flashed. He spoke with the resolute intensity which springs from outraged conviction. His apostrophe drew from Barbara, who was listening, the comment: "Why, Ollie, I never saw you so worked up over anything before. You looked positively fierce. It's splendid, you know, to hear a man in these unemotional days let himself go like that. Before I know it, I shall be composing a poem in praise of Governor Bonner. I'd no idea the dispute was so important." She spoke with the wistfulness of awakened interest.

"It isn't," whispered Mary, who was sitting beside her. "He merely thinks it is." She had as lief that he should hear her remark as not.

He turned toward her grave and frowning with protest. "If that's your conclusion, Mary, you totally fail to appreciate the significance of the——"

Her indulgent smile disarmed him, and she cut him off with the meek reply: "Of course, Ollie, it's im-

portant if you say so." There was the benefit of the Fords with whom they had been talking, she continued: "He is tongue-tied compared to what I say before yesterday when the news was fresh. I spent one of our precious evenings—didn't you, West?—in walking up and down the library holding forth as to the iniquity of the bill and the glory of the veto. If I hadn't tried to read Governor Bonaparte's first inaugural and found it lamentably dull, I should have been tempted by Ollie's enthusiasm to think of him as a second Abraham Lincoln. As it is, I'm dense enough—you can't blame me, love, if I'm confessedly dense—not to be able to see the occasion for all this fuss when both sides admit they are seeking the same thing. That's because I'm a woman—the reason's simple. And it's because I'm a woman and a wife and the mother of two helpless, hungry babes whose father has been ill the better portion of twelve months, that I ventured to intimate after he had been glorifying his governor for a considerable time that he might do worse than close his eyes for at least a year to what is going on at the State House and abstain from dabbling in politics. And he took it splendidly; I'll say that for the wise one."

Oliver looked as if he wished to be angry, but was curbing himself for lack of direct provocation. Was not his wife beaming at him? She had admitted that the issue was important, if he said so, and owned up to her own density. It would be silly to be annoyed. And yet all the starch had been taken out of his patriotic mood by her would-be playfulness. Despite Barbara's interest, the atmosphere had ceased to be favorable for serious discussion of what he had so much at heart. He had even been made to appear a little foolish. Yet to be cross would obviously invite the retort that he ought to have known she was merely jesting. Mary had put

him too on the defensive; and he must meet the charge. By way of doing so he said: "Nothing is lost at the present juncture by not closing my eyes. I'm powerless as any looker-on. The votes are as good as counted already that the legislature sustains the veto, and there won't be occasion to mix in politics before the early autumn." Pausing a moment, he chose to add with an eluding sprightliness borrowed from his wife's book: "When that time comes, I'm not making any promises. I'm hoping I won't be drafted. But you can count on one thing—if I do have to get into the fight and the fight takes the shape which now seems probable—there won't be any opportunity for idle sparring, only for hard blows straight from the shoulder." Oliver had admitted that Mary was right regarding the next few months, and yet he had saved his self-respect as a public-spirited citizen. It was a satisfaction to listen to Ham Ford's emphatic indorsement which followed on the heels of his own tempered assertion of independence. "I'm with you, Ollie, old fellow. Bonner gets my vote after this through thick and thin; and the domestic male vote is not to be despised."

Ham's facetious proclivities were regarded by Mary with more favorable eyes than formerly. His vindication as a discerning husband had resulted not merely in tolerance for his drollery, but in a half-acknowledged appetite for it. He had lived up to the spirit of the marital experiment which had transfigured him in her estimation. One had only to glance at Barbara to realize how well and happy she was. Instead of the haggard expression which suggested the pressure of a multiplicity of uncongenial cares, her face had regained the hue of health and the dreamy placidity which had distinguished it as a girl. She had ceased to be slack in her attire; had become not merely spruce but ambitious

to look her best. The success of her play seemed likely to be rivalled by the novel she had just completed, for the serial rights of which she had already been paid a glittering sum, and which was to be dramatized immediately.

On the other hand, the smooth workings of the domestic machinery had been a constant surprise (and also a positive joy) to Mary. Her concern had been to save Barbara, even at the expense of a second-rate husband, and thereby give genius its proper chance. Accordingly she had looked for discord below-stairs—even explosions. Hamilton would have to learn by experience—but he could learn in time. His aptness had evoked her enthusiasm and also demonstrated the fallacy of the theory that household work was peculiarly woman's work—proving that a man was sufficiently well fitted for it if he chose to think so. Since Ham's incumbency not a servant had departed; there was nothing in the aspect of the rooms to suggest the lack of a feminine eye—on the contrary they were tidier than under Barbara's rule; the cuisine was more nutritious and appetizing than formerly; and though they spent more because of the increasing income, the bills (so Barbara had confided to her) were proportionately smaller. Could anything be more propitious? And as his master-stroke Ham had managed to pilot the twins through the measles without interfering with the ordered sequence of Barbara's imaginative work. She was busy with the final chapters of her novel at the time and he had barred her from the nursery. Now, he said, he was husbanding his energies so as to be proof against the wear and tear of whooping-cough.

They were going to have another baby. Barbara had confided the news to her that evening, and seemed pleased. This would make number four. If they were ready, the time was appropriate. The novel was finished;

Barbara would be benefited by letting her imagination lie fallow. And Ham's conjugal perspicacity deserved its reward. Naturally the success of their domestic experiment had engendered a new happiness the rapture of which drew them into each other's arms. As she kissed her friend, Mary's congratulations far from harboring dissent were sympathetic, almost emotionally so. Undeniably children were Heaven's best gift, especially when they came into the world at the propitious moment.

As Oliver had predicted, the legislature failed to pass the so-called railway appliance bill over the governor's veto. But when the session came to an end a few weeks later it was apparent that the opposition party intended to make this measure the key-note of the autumn campaign. Oliver's disposition to lay stress on the importance of the issue thus presented was not to be accounted for solely by having grown older, but was directly traceable to two characteristics which, however dormant at times because of his amiable exterior, were fundamental and deep-seated. These were his strong love of justice and his clear-headedness. He was repelled by whatever conflicted with either fair play or orderly thinking in any department of life. This had always been the case. He shrank from anything which savored either of indirection or of taking a mean advantage of an adversary. Even in the heat of ward controversies his methods had been uniformly scrupulous. It was understood—and this was one source of his popularity—that he would live up to a promise in spirit as well as to the letter. In the wider province of political thought justice was synonymous for him with a liberal outlook and receptivity to new ideas.

To these qualities, the tenacity of which had been but dimly revealed to Oliver himself until they were tested, the bill championed by the opposition was

peculiarly repugnant. It offended his sense both of what was ingenuous and what was just. With the underlying humanitarian impulse he had no quarrel. On the contrary, from the moment when the general subject of providing suitable safeguards was broached he had welcomed—and in private councils urged—favorable action as in accord with more enlightened public opinion. In the establishment of a board of public utilities he had seen the first orderly step of a responsible party toward more efficient supervision of corporate concerns. When the new popular demand loomed up on the horizon he had taken for granted that it would be summarily disposed of by reference to this body. The subsequent agitation appeared to him simply as an attempt to make party capital out of ignorant clamor. It flew in the face of logic by substituting hastily prepared nostrums for scientific remedies. It violated the first principles of equity by seeking the undoing of a governor who was stanchly in favor of the reforms demanded. His blood boiled at the aspersions heaped upon a man who refused to favor legislation which combined scurvy treatment of the railroads with mob-like disregard of political sequence. Mary could say what she would—hint that he exaggerated; the issue might not be colossal, but did it not involve the distinction between intrinsic decency and the lack of it; between political right and wrong? He longed to gird on his armor; but in the first place there was nothing at the moment which he could tilt at. The bill was dead, and the legislature had adjourned. And in the second place Mary was right in her reminder that he could not afford the time.

CHAPTER IX

DURING the months between the spring and the autumn both Oliver and his wife were happy in their preoccupation. Each was so busy that neither had leisure to follow the other's activities, except in general outline. And yet, at the regular meeting times of their daily programme, the sense of comradeship seemed in no wise diminished by their egoistic preoccupation. And this in spite of sundry reserves on Mary's part, a little galling to her pride, but in which she took a sly delight.

Of course, they frequently compared notes, chiefly at meals. Mary gleaned that he had been retained in several big cases which presented knotty problems, and were likely to be remunerative. He occasionally mentioned names and made brief reference to the issues, partly by way of letting her see that he was getting on, partly to keep her in touch with what he was doing. But evidently he did not expect any more than she desired precise knowledge on her part. Whatever their preconceptions prior to marriage as to the scope of a mutual thrashing out of daily doings, experience had demonstrated that it was impracticable—futile even—unless it was confined to general terms. Time was too precious; there were other things to talk about; and would she understand the larger issues of his legal practice, if he tried to set them before her? The concluding impediment Mary smilingly treasured up as a joke against Oliver. Yet it was true in a sense. She

would not understand, but not because she was unfitted to understand if she set to work to do so. And dear Ollie was so naïve about it also; admitting her to full companionship with one hand yet gently pushing her back with the other, and thoroughly unaware all the time of his performance. Such was the unconscious influence of generations of point of view on a man who had been wont to declare during their engagement (and who would still agree if she put the question squarely to him) that woman's so-called inferiority was the result of her having been kept under for centuries—of her having never been given a chance.

There was another delicious side to it which amused her even more. Far from realizing the seriousness of the artistic work she was engaged in, the intensity and time she was bestowing on the decorations for the Italian garden, Oliver betrayed both his ignorance and his unintentional condescension by his very inquiries. One result of his becoming so busy had been a relapse into the frame of mind which fondly pictured a wife as immersed to her elbows in household duties and refused to regard her avocations as other than pretty accomplishments to be touched on half jocularly and then dismissed. Her completed design for the pergola had so taken the fancy of Henry Thornton that he was singing her praises to all his friends and had commissioned her with the approval of his supervising architect to do a series of ornamental seats for the terraces. When, brimming over with pride, she casually informed Oliver, his comment was:

"The pergola made a ten-strike? I prophesied so. That's fine, dearest. More pin-money pouring in, I assume. Keep it up and make hay while the sun shines."

These were the good-humored felicitations of a husband proud of a wife who had shown herself more

clever than any one had a right to expect; but they evinced no appreciation of the strides she had made. Not that she misjudged her talent. She was just leaving the starting-point in the race and the true goal was far away. It seemed to recede each time she regarded it. All she wished was that he could realize her work had ceased to be that of an amateur.

"It's a business arrangement, of course; the terms have not been referred to yet. But——"

She spoke with dignity, then broke off abruptly. What was the use? His remarks were thoroughly in keeping with his customary style of inquiry as to her progress. How could it interest her so vitally as selecting the dinner or looking after the nursery? There was a gaiety of tone which contrasted oddly with the concern manifested by him a few weeks previous at the sudden departure of her two maids—an appalling disaster, he evidently believed from her point of view. This mishap, the first of its kind since their marriage, falling from a clear sky, had caused her mortification, for she had flattered herself that her system was such that her fortunate servants would stay with her forever. But the departure occasioned only a momentary pause in the domestic routine. She had cooked the dinner and bridged the chasm with a minimum of friction to Oliver save for solicitude of his own devising.

Mary cherished, however, no annoyance, but derived amusement from his obtuseness. Disappointing, yes; but another of those discoveries which, like his failure to rise to the moral height of the situation which had culminated in Sybil's broken engagement, must be recognized as a flaw in his make-up, and accepted, seeing that she loved him exactly as well in spite of it. Some day, perhaps, she would enlighten him as to her actual powers by leaping into such prominence that he

would perceive how blind he had been. In the meanwhile, she would hug her secret and enjoy the diversion which it provided. For her happiness was in no degree dimmed—a satisfactory and rather surprising consequence. She thought of Oliver as a perfect dear. Her life was shaping itself wholly to her liking. She was feeling her way in her endeavor to illustrate deftly that an able woman could fulfil all the functions of a wife and mother, and yet demonstrate her faculty in some independent field; and at the same time make herself a more interesting companion to her husband, and by this stimulus constantly raise his own standard of efficiency.

She was working harder than ever. The seats for the terraces were exactly in her line, and her ambition had been stimulated by Henry Thornton's intimation that some of his friends were likely to give her orders. Before long she might have more than she could attend to personally; be obliged to engage a draftsman! She smiled at the possibility, but once for all rejected it. Her idea from the outset had been combination of woman's two great opportunities; to develop her talent side by side with the most efficient housekeeping. Clearly she must not accept orders which she could not individually execute or which would transform her domestic shrine (what else was a well-ordered house?) into a workshop. By this limitation everything she did would reflect her personal touch, and the risk of neglecting either interest be avoided.

But, on the other hand, it was imperative that she should conduct her establishment in such a way as to insure a maximum of leisure for the work awaiting her. It had always been her theory that the key to domestic efficiency was an executive brain; the capacity to do a thing superlatively well oneself and more especially

to impart that capacity to others. Before delegating the performance of household tasks one should be able to discern by a sweeping daily glance if anything were wrong and be able to rectify imperfections handily. Ever since her marriage she had escaped actual household drudgery by her intelligent supervision of one or two maids. But neither circumstances nor inclination had thus far permitted her to divest herself altogether of manual work. She had felt that a certain amount of it was beneficial to her development as a wife. She had busied herself diligently in the service of her husband and children, and she had the satisfaction of knowing that her "quiet hour" was the reward of doing nimbly what had to be done and of eliminating much that was superfluous. Save for her executive gift, she would never have been able to secure it.

The situation had now become more complicated, largely because the children were older. They required more of her time. In order to give it to them she must economize elsewhere and rely to a greater extent on her ability to delegate to others many tasks. To do so would be impossible unless the subordinates to whom this latitude was given were strictly attentive to her directions and in sympathy with her system. The demands of the household upon her leisure were sure to increase as time went on, and it looked as if she would require more and more privacy for her professional work. There might be moments in the future when to turn her back on the possibilities of further maternity might condemn her as passionless. It was clear that she must take into account many and varying contingencies, if she would protect both her wifehood and her professional ambition. Fortunately Oliver was now on his feet again and pecuniary stringency likely to be a thing of the past. They could afford to hire additional help, but clearly

it must be of the right sort. If new orders came in—if she had to leave home to fulfil them suitably, she must have some one in the house on whose intelligence and loyalty she could rely. Some one to whose eyes and hands she could impart, as by telepathy, the power to carry out her theories adequately. It would not be easy to find exactly the right person, and yet the need of curtailing her household activities was becoming imperative. The recent experience with her feckless maids tended to shake her confidence in the ordinary domestic. Then suddenly illumination came and she wondered that so obvious a solution should not have occurred to her sooner.

They awoke one morning to find the death of Walter Price staring Benham in the face in grisly newspaper head-lines. He had been killed in the environs at night while speeding in his high-power automobile which had swerved from the highway and plunged down an embankment, turning over in the process—one of the early victims of a catastrophe now so frequent that the first page of every Monday-morning newspaper has become a necrology. His companion, the only other occupant of the car, and killed also, was a woman, a detail which aroused Mary's conjecture despite the horror of the incident. Who was she? She had no doubt from the first that her immediate surmise was correct. As Oliver expressed no curiosity on the subject, she let twenty-four hours elapse, then inquired. When he pleaded lack of positive knowledge she taxed him with suppression, and he presently admitted that masculine gossip identified her with the woman that Walter was supposed to have discarded. It appeared as the result of further probing that Walter had reinstated her almost immediately after the rupture with Sybil; that Oliver, without knowing, had guessed as much and did not

appear greatly surprised. Dire as was the tragedy, Mary could not resist the complacent reflection that her previous interference had been amply justified by the sequel. Did Sybil need better proof of her pseudo-lover's disposition than this voluntary renewal of licentiousness? And how trivial did the indiscretion (if it were one) of tampering with the letter appear in comparison with the merit of having rescued a dear friend from the clutches of one likely to expose her to just this indignity after the glamour of marriage was over. That Walter would return to his paramour sooner or later had been a menacing and determining probability in Sybil's eyes, to which the color of certainty had now been given. What but an essentially coarse nature could have thus compromised with disgrace by plunging deeper into the mire? Poor Sybil was surely to be congratulated on a providential escape from untold wretchedness.

While thus mentally congratulating her friend, the thought occurred to Mary—why would not Sybil be the very person to act as understudy for the wife and mother in the Oliver Randall household? Under the circumstances would she not be more satisfactory than any stranger, or any other acquaintance? Objections presented themselves simultaneously with her inquiry, but dwindled in the scale with the advantages as often as she weighed them. Sybil was not the ideal person in any sense. She was neither executive by temperament nor energetic. As her father's housekeeper, she was versed in the methods of the old school, and totally unfamiliar with standards of modern domestic science. It was her nature to shrink from initiative and avoid responsibility. She was content to busy herself for hours with intricate and useless needlework. In a crisis or emergency with no one to direct her she would

be helpless—likely to collapse, if not to faint dead away. But she possessed two saving traits which, from the point of view of her availability, stood out as invaluable. She was submissive—incapable of resistance, and she was loyal. What Mary required more than everything else was obedience and sympathetic interest. The ideas, the system, the oversight she could herself supply. Sybil with all her lack of resolute fibre and all her daintiness might be counted on to learn; and having learned, to follow out to the letter. Under an intelligent, supervising eye might she not readily prove a good manager and exercise a beneficial influence on the children? For Sybil, however volatile or even self-indulgent, if left to her own devices, had pleasing tastes, gentle accomplishments, and was her devoted friend.

There was a reason, too, why, having thought of her, the idea should persist. By force of circumstances Sybil was on her mind. During the months which had elapsed since the engagement with Walter Price was broken Sybil had failed to fix on a means of livelihood. She had subsisted idly on her small patrimony, endeavoring in a limp fashion to procure some employment. Oliver had tried to find something suited to her, but it had not been easy, for she possessed no equipment except for teaching languages, and there was a dearth of applicants in Benham for lessons in French or Italian. Her advertisements in this behalf had been barren of results. Unless she could obtain some nucleus of pupils, she would be forced to study bookkeeping and stenography, for which she was without especial training. That she would ever be able to earn a suitable living as a clerk was a doubt which had been harassing Mary. By reason of her peculiar characteristics Sybil seemed to be one of the few women for whom there was no alternative destiny for matrimony, a conclusion which, though it constituted

her a parasite, increased Mary's sense of responsibility in having been privy to a decision which had deprived her of an unworthy husband. Mary still cherished the belief that the right man would turn up eventually. But how was Sybil to get along in the interim?

Why had she not sooner thought of her as a helper? The idea of employing her gained headway from the secret admission that in a certain sense she owed her reparation. By constituting Sybil a member of the household she would tide over the situation for her until it appeared whether she were going to marry. Under her roof Sybil would be more apt to meet desirable men than while living in lodgings; and at the worst would learn scientific methods of housekeeping and the scientific care of children, which might be utilized later as a vocation. The longer Mary pondered the project, the more it attracted her.

By the time she was ready to announce her intention to Oliver, Mary was congratulating herself on her good fortune. She might have hunted long without finding any one to whom she could intrust, with an equal sense of security, the performance of the tasks she was relinquishing. It would be necessary at the outset to give explicit instructions and to lay emphasis on them. After this she would be able virtually to close her eyes—to open them only occasionally after the first short period of correction in order to note how smoothly everything was working. For, like the people who sleep with one eye open, she would know instinctively if anything was amiss. And once that the submissive Sybil was well-tutored everything should move like clockwork. What Hamilton Ford had done of his own initiative and without instruction could surely be successfully rivalled by the combination which she proposed.

"You will never know the difference. You will be

just as comfortable in every respect," she said to Oliver, whose silence and perplexity betokened his astonishment. "And I shall secure the necessary time for doing some of the other things I enjoy," she added firmly.

"Such as?"

"My art work in particular."

"But you do that now."

"Not nearly so much as I wish, not nearly so well as I wish. When Sybil comes I hope to make you still prouder of me and to earn a lot more—pin-money."

"And she has agreed to come?"

"If you do not object. I sounded her and she jumped at the proposal. She seemed very grateful; the tears came to her eyes. If she doesn't do something of the kind, I don't see any future for the poor child. As regards earning power, she is at present practically helpless. Some day, of course, I hope to see her marry."

"But she will make a third person in the house. How shall we get rid of her when you and I wish to be alone?"

Oliver's tone was that of the attorney eager to draw from a client the exact truth; solicitous rather than disapproving. Already by a lucid preface his wife had outlined her need of more assistance and the advantages of supplementing her domestic staff with a deserving friend who would have their interests at heart. Her household cares were multiplying. Freedom from impending drudgery would strengthen their conjugal ties, and Sybil would be provided for. There had seemed to Mary nothing disingenuous in thus giving her own need of greater scope for her artistic career only a secondary place among her reasons. She had indicated it as one of them; and save for his obtuseness Oliver should have divined what was uppermost in her mind. She had not wished to frighten him, however, by an announcement of what might seem revolutionary

abdication on her part. He must become accustomed by degrees to the idea that henceforth the most of her time would be given to her profession. She had told him that Sybil would perform by proxy many of the duties affecting his daily comfort without being too explicit as to the use she herself would make of the time thus saved. When just now he had questioned the desirability of the arrangement, she had indicated the truth. Yet in breaking the news to him she had felt justified in laying emphasis on the unifying feature, and it was to this that she now returned in answer to his last stricture:

“You must trust me for that, dear. She won’t interfere with us in the least. In fact the principal inducement is that you and I will be all the better comrades as the result of my being less tied down. We shall be able to discuss and undertake a variety of things from which we have been cut off hitherto. The time is coming when it will be advantageous to us both to mix more with other people—kindred spirits, so as to keep in touch with what the world is thinking about, to accept their invitations and to entertain them here. I recognize, of course, that it is better for every woman to perform some portion of the household work—the whole of it perhaps at first. There is a spiritual tonic in the experience. But the important thing is the knowing how. I heard a cynical man once say—I’ve an impression it was George Patterson—that the American housewife prates about the dignity of domestic labor, yet is the very first woman in all Christendom to run to an intelligence office and hire a servant the moment her husband or she can afford it. There isn’t any real inconsistency in that. So long as there are emigrants from other nations willing to—but I’m straying from the exact point, am I not? It is this;

that so far as convenience is concerned, Sybil's presence will be a blessing; so far as invasion of our happiness and privacy, you will never know that she is here. You like Sybil, don't you, Ollie? If I supposed for a moment that——"

"I like her very much. I don't know her very well. But she always appears to me a sweet, ingratiating, perfectly helpless little being whom any one would be glad to protect."

"Precisely. And at this juncture protection will mean everything to her. At the same time, Oliver dearest, I don't wish to disguise from you that the arrangement is equally convenient for me. Having Sybil at my elbow to see that the details of the household are kept at the standard which I have set will relieve me in a variety of ways. Unless a woman uses her wits, even in these days when one hears so much about feminine liberty, she is likely to remain a slave while imagining she is free."

Perplexed, if not startled, as he had been by Mary's proposition, the reasonableness of which slowly dawned on him, Oliver was too preoccupied by other matters, and too susceptible to the spell of her glowing personality to oppose her. His mind, concentrated on one piece of important legislation after another, was nevertheless in odd moments casting sheep's eyes at the political arena, where the impending conflict between Governor Guy Bonner and those whose aim it was to supplant him was on the eve of beginning. Having persuaded himself that it was his duty as the father of a family to keep out of the fight, he had relented to the extent of promising, if they had need of him, to make two or three speeches toward the close of the campaign. He was burning to throw himself into the thick of the fray; so much so that when Everett Dean and others pleaded

with him reproachfully, he found difficulty in not bursting the bonds of prudence which restrained him. What seemed to him the cruel inconsistency of the attack on his leader stirred him to a degree to which no issue had ever stirred him before, and those who heard his private denunciations—his only outlet at the moment—could not fail to realize that they were listening to one whose sense of fair play had been deeply outraged. It was no wonder that those charged with enlisting his services should refuse to believe that he was in earnest and secretly indulge the hope that the moment he stepped upon the platform his meagre promises would fructify abundantly, for they felt they were dealing with a man on fire.

To Oliver, thus champing on the bit, his wife's proposal appeared a matter of minor importance, startling for a moment because of its novelty, but clearly belonging to her domain. Since she favored the expedient, why should he question its feasibility? She was the one chiefly to be affected by Sybil's continual presence in the house. While he had no question that a warm-hearted—and slightly contrite—desire to provide for her friend was the underlying motive, he had Mary's assurance that the plan would tally admirably with her own wish for more leisure.

If she could obtain this by the instalment of a capable factotum, who, though intimate, would obscure herself at proper times, why need he demur because the experiment was unusual? Originality was one of Mary's greatest charms, one of the qualities which had most attracted him. She was free to conduct her establishment to suit herself. As for Sybil, he had been entirely sincere—there was nothing about her which could possibly jar on him. She appeared to him exactly as he had described her; and under the circumstances her violet

order of personality was likely to prove advantageous; for, though fragrant and alluring, she might readily escape notice behind a stone or be forgotten in a nook. Compared with her, his wife was a stately rose or lily on its stem, lustrous with life. Oliver thought he had never seen Mary looking handsomer or more vibrant with health and energy than at this moment. She had lost every trace of the mere girl. Her figure displayed the contour and the pose of well-developed womanhood. Her features were stronger, the lines of her face more pronounced. Yet despite this amplitude she remained slender and elastic. He saw in her the effulgent, able-bodied seraph in place of the beckoning, interrogative wood-nymph; the embodiment of all a woman should be, even to the point that he was half aware of being a little afraid of her. Was she not to be admired unreservedly? Yet even in this self-congratulation which took the form of eagerness to adopt her preferences and to think everything she advocated wise, Oliver was vaguely troubled by the unformulated dread that she was slipping away from him—that he was kept at arm's length. Somehow in the process of radiant development she had become more elusive. Tiny flecks on the smooth pool of their complete accord perplexed him when he stopped to think of them. What of the summary strangling of his friendship with the Pattersons? Worse still, what of the opened and examined letter from poor Walter Price? These questions showed their ugly heads when the wind blew from a certain quarter.

While hearing his wife set forth the advantages of having Sybil with them, he had listened eagerly to the prophecy that instead of separating, it would unite them more closely. He could not see exactly how, but presumably this was because his mind was so full of other things that he had not accurately comprehended the

workings of the proposed arrangement. If, however, Sybil's coming was to result in larger opportunities for intercourse between himself and Mary, more leisure for mutual understanding, before he knew it the mantle of indefinite dread might have slipped from his shoulders and he be still more truly than at present the happiest man alive. Even had Mary's plan met with his disapproval, he would have been slow to oppose her in a matter which concerned her own department. But in this instance he felt free to dismiss the change as cheerfully agreed to, for its less obvious recommendations were illumined by a propitious hope.

Nevertheless Sybil's advent a month later was in the nature of a surprise. More correctly, it passed virtually unnoticed by Oliver, for his pent-up principles had burst their bonds and he was speaking nightly to crowded meetings. He simply realized that she was in the house, looking very much as usual save that she had exchanged her mourning for colored gowns. His entire attention for the moment was centred on the election, the date of which was only three weeks off. While the state of mind which had confined him in his tent in the early stages of the campaign was the reverse of sulkiness, he emulated the wrath of Achilles from the moment of his stepping forth, and would fain have dragged, metaphorically speaking, the political remains of Steve Bartlett thrice round the walls of Benham in token of irate vengeance. But an opportunity to do this looked doubtful at the best. The clamor against the governor who had stood in the path of the popular will had swollen, and skilfully manipulated, threatened to dislodge him. There was not a doubt of the closeness of the contest or of the necessity that his supporters should strain every sinew and bring every resource to bear if they would escape defeat. The State was in a ferment of

excitement over the issue and the defection in Oliver's party which had cropped out during the legislative session had spread. He had promised to speak toward the close of the campaign if he were needed. When approached before the campaign was half over, Oliver did not require to be informed of the gravity of the situation. He was distressfully aware of it already from constant tension and was waiting for the signal. It seemed incredible there should be so many dense to the merits of the controversy. Yet deeply as he felt, it was characteristic that his attitude on the platform should be that of one who says: "Come, let us reason together and thrash this thing out amicably," rather than that of the hotspur or vituperator. Though burning with indignation, his habitual tact tempered his delivery. As he traversed the State in the wake of the big men of the party, one of the smaller fry filling up the gaps by speaking in the less important places, his speeches drew increasing audiences. The newspapers commented on this, calling attention to the persuasive quality of this argument—a happy blending of earnestness and humor—or now and again instancing its lucidity by quotation. And there was no more doubt among those looking on that his services were effective than there was in the mind of Oliver himself that he was in the fight to battle vigorously to the end.

The end was bitter, but disappointing at the last rather than unexpected, for Oliver's perspicacity—his faculty for counting noses accurately—had forewarned him during the week before election of the probable outcome. Yet he had been confident that the result would be close and clung to the belief that the sober second thought of the voters would assert itself in time. Governor Bonner was defeated; driven from office by a majority of ten thousand. But this fell far short of the

figures predicted. Though decisive, the victory was Pyrrhic in the eyes of those rebuked and afforded a basis of hope for the future. If artificial agitation, abetting popular impulse, had been able to triumph by no wider margin, were there not ample grounds for expectation that the party which had sown the wind would reap the whirlwind when the public fancy, having spent itself, had time to reflect on the quality of the rising crop? Barely had the vanquished faced the ignominy of defeat before their gloom was mitigated by the whisper from every side: "Wait until next year." Within a week after the ballots had been counted Oliver was comforting his outraged sensibilities with this healing ointment and grinding his teeth in vindictive pantomime before Everett Dean.

The party had met with a reverse and principle been driven to the wall for the time being—he could not dispute it. He was hoarse and weary. He had sped over the State for over four weeks, sleeping in strange beds. He had let his law business slide and was out of pocket as the result. But these various chagrins appeared so many trifles, of no more consequence than the forelock dangling over his eyes which he had to keep brushing aside, for it had grown too long during the campaign, and he had lacked the time to have it cut. The din of the conflict still rang in his ears and, though discomfited, he had revelled in the experience. For the moment he must pause and adjust his affairs which were at sixes and sevens. But "wait until next year!"—and next year was not very far off. He was already hungry for the fray, and his appetite was stimulated by the ardor of deep conviction.

CHAPTER X

ONE evening a few days after the election a short newspaper clipping was handed to Oliver by Sybil. "Have you seen this?" she said in her sweet voice. "I cut it out."

Oliver had joined Mary and her in the parlor after dinner. The item ran as follows: "Now that the result is known and the casualties have been footed up, it will be well to bear in mind that not all of the glory belongs to the victors. It is worthy of note that the firmament, below the horizon of which Governor Guy Bonner's star has just disappeared, is not altogether void of luminaries calculated to sparkle when the present clouds of disaster have rolled away. We refer among others and in particular to our fellow citizen Oliver Randall, attorney at law. Those who have followed his itinerary during the campaign cannot fail to have been impressed by the vigor and plausibility of his arguments, whether agreeing with them or not. If his party associates are to be credited with ordinary astuteness, here is a young man whose light will not long be allowed to remain hidden under a bushel."

Glancing at the slip, Oliver replied: "Somebody showed it to me—and I've been chaffed considerably. Lays it on pretty thick, doesn't it?"

"I call it pretty complimentary. I wish I could have heard some of the speeches."

"What is that, Ollie?" asked Mary.

"Only a floral tribute from this morning's *Banner*. Now that the remains have been interred, they are trying to cheer up the mourners." He passed the clipping to his wife, adding: "It's civil of them, I'll say that, though exaggerated. I put my soul into that fray."

"The *Banner*? How does the *Banner* happen to be here?" murmured Mary as she began to read. The Randalls took the Benham *Daily Sentinel*, and the Benham *Banner* was an enterprising rival. When she looked up it was Sybil who answered the inquiry.

"I'm the culprit. I've been buying all the newspapers lately on the sly. I'm so hopelessly ignorant of politics, and I wanted to learn something about what has been going on." Glancing at Oliver, who seemed now for the first time conscious of her presence in the house, she added: "You would have told me of course; but you were so driven that I didn't like to disturb you."

"Are you much edified?" inquired Mary.

"I'm immensely interested; but perplexed now and then. I shall have to ask a few questions some day."

"No wonder you're perplexed. It's the difference between tweedledum and tweedledee; I've said so from the first. You needn't glower, Ollie, for it's all over and settled." Mary held out the clipping to him. "That's a splendid notice and I'm sure you deserve every word of the praise. It ought to set you in the public eye and bring you more law business."

"It's over for the time being—but it isn't settled. Those who forced the issue on the State will be turned out of office next year. I'll bet on it if you like; a piece of jewelry against a box of golf-balls."

Mary shook her head. "I never bet, you know. I don't pretend to be a wizard. Besides I hope heartily that your side will win, for it would gratify you so much. Only when the time comes you mustn't let your political

friends persuade you that your services are indispensable—and so impose on your good nature—if all the indications point to a defeat.”

“I love to bet; in France, I mean, on *les petits chevaux*. It was amusing. One evening I won a hundred francs.” Sybil’s words were addressed to Oliver. “That is what another newspaper said—‘wait until next year.’ It’s very confusing, but I was on your side. And I thought all the time,” she added with a forlorn laugh which showed her pretty teeth, “that you would win. But you did not speak in Benham, so we could not go to hear you. Why was that?”

“Only the big men spoke in Benham. I’m well down on the list of spellbinders.”

“I thought I explained that to you, Sybil. Oliver was invited to speak in the smaller cities and the country towns.”

“But who knows that if they had invited him to speak here, the result might not have been different?”

Mary, who had taken up the evening paper on which she habitually concentrated her attention for five minutes, and thus posted herself regarding current events for twenty-four hours, gave vent to her amusement.

“Who knows, indeed? There’s a genuinely old-fashioned transparent compliment for you, Ollie. One of the barefaced brand on which every pretty woman used to rely in order to inveigle man. You’re a minx, Sybil. But he’s just gullible enough—and just in the humor, too—to swallow it. Or if not exactly that,” she added, “for I bear loyal witness to Ollie’s intrinsic modesty—it will pave the way for a mutual confabulation—questions on your side and arguments on his—by means of which you will be enlightened politically and he be given the opportunity to explain how the overthrow happened and why it need not have happened.

In the meanwhile I'll busy myself near by with congenial pursuits, and reflect on the perversity of those who refuse to recognize that they are beaten."

Suiting her action to her words, Mary rose to shift her seat so that she might be less disturbed by the murmur of conversation, though still within ear-shot if it took an interesting turn. As an antidote to her raillery, and perhaps by way of exhibiting the ideality of the relations between her husband and herself, she paused to put her arm fondly around Oliver's shoulder, and facing Sybil pressed her cheek against his. "Stay with us and talk to her, and fight your battles over again."

"Yes, please do; there's so much I should like to know."

Save for an occasional retort to show that he was still firm in his convictions, Oliver had ceased to be annoyed by his wife's sallies. They no longer brought the flush of irritation to his cheek nor, however rampant, made him feel shamefaced. He deplored her attitude, but he had reasoned himself into a frame of mind which made allowances for it. In the first place politics obviously bored her, and her way of expressing her lack of interest was to make fun of them. Come to think of it, was it altogether surprising that a woman should find the details of ward controversies uninspiring and even sordid? And these were the matters with which she had associated his activities in the years immediately following their marriage. This explained in a measure her failure to recognize the ethical question involved in the fate of Governor Bonner. Oliver had been disappointed—more grievously surprised and disappointed than he had permitted himself to disclose. But he had soothed himself with the reminder that after all his own change of political point of view was recent. Could he seriously complain that Mary continued blind to his

change of heart and still regarded him as the mere campaigner?

Her eyes would be opened in time if he persevered. He must remember too that her immediate obtuseness was encouraged by her desire that he should concentrate his mind completely on the law. In respect to this he was still on the defensive, despite his imperturbability. This did not mean that he continued to harbor a guilty conscience. He had flown deliberately in the face of prudence and self-interest because he could not help it, and he gloried in the apostasy. But he could not blame Mary for not exonerating him or for her inability to perceive his point of view. Moreover he must do her the justice to admit that she had refrained from hampering him during the last few weeks of the campaign. Though absorbed in her pursuits, she must have been aware that he was speaking every night. She had from time to time repeated her innuendoes that the contest was over straws; but she had not upbraided him for neglecting his law practice. She had been greatly engrossed by the completion of the terrace seats she had undertaken for Henry Thornton, and had made a journey during the period to his country-seat in connection with them. Perhaps this explained her forbearance if explanation was called for. Perhaps, on the other hand, it might mean that she had caught a glimpse of the quality of Oliver's enthusiasm and was less disposed to frown on it.

Gratified by Sybil's interest and convinced that her desire for enlightenment was sincere, Oliver followed his wife's recommendation and seated himself beside her. He was glad of an opportunity to unbosom his hot indignation and to set forth the whole political situation for the benefit of a listener inclined to be sympathetic and craving conviction—the actual proofs of the iniquity

of the victorious enemy. As they talked he found that he had to do with a more alert intelligence than he had expected; Sybil knew next to nothing about politics, but she was surprisingly quick to grasp the purport of what he told her. Having dolefully pleaded that the technical terms used by him—lack of knowledge of which would have disgraced a schoolgirl—meant nothing to her, and having required answers, the primitiveness of which taxed his powers of concealment, she astonished him by the swiftness of her inferences. It was evident that she could put two and two together with the celerity of divination, and this piqued his interest by suddenly demonstrating her to be keeping pace with him when he thought her leagues behind. "Yes—yes," she would exclaim with a pretty impatience which was another way of saying: "I understand perfectly; don't stop; go right on."

His desire to convince her was secondary, for she had already declared herself on his side. Her ability to understand his position, her readiness to sympathize with his discomfiture were such agreeable solvents that he neglected to break away and seek refuge in his den, as he had intended, and was incited by what pleased him most of all, her warlike fervor—to tell of his own experiences. For nearly an hour he dwelt lightly but comprehensively on the vicissitudes of the recent campaign. She listened with absorbed attention. Intently following the course of events and the synopsis of his speeches, Sybil flushed, clinched her small fists in mimic menace, or laughed in gay appreciation. Twice she clapped her hands in her enthusiasm, then looked appalled lest she had disturbed Mary.

Intending to have been at work, Oliver lingered and abandoned himself to the pastime. He noted that the substitution of colors for her mourning gave Sybil a

slightly different aspect. Instead of the shrinking violet, she resembled now a pansy. She wore a lustrous gown of an elusive shade which puzzled him as to whether it was blue or green. Its trimmings attracted his eye both by their hue and the jauntiness of the bows. Again he noticed her taste in trinkets, which were of delicate manufacture and obviously foreign. He was pleased to see that her countenance was free from melancholy. The trace of it observable when she had come to live with them a few weeks before had disappeared. Clearly Mary's kind act had been just the dispensation needed to free her from dwelling on either of her sorrows, by providing her with active and congenial employment. As regards the merit of his wife's earlier action he need not concern himself further. Miss Fielding was not heart-broken; Walter Price was in his grave; the episode was no longer real. But in its sequel he was ready to agree that Mary had demonstrated her loyalty as a friend, and her wisdom. The experiment of bringing Sybil into their household seemed to be working finely. His personal comfort had not been interfered with in the least, and the evening's experience showed that they had acquired not merely a serviceable but a congenial inmate who would never obtrude.

Mary's reflection, as she sat within reach of their voices but mostly inattentive to them, was very similar. The experiment had amply justified itself. Sybil's qualifications had proved to be those which she had expected, plus an unlooked-for handiness. She had shown herself more expert in household management, neater and more efficient than Mary had supposed. To be sure, she had been given detailed, explicit instructions as to what was desired of her, which were wholly inconsistent with either slipshod or extravagant methods, in the hope that a death-blow might be dealt once for

all to both slackness and self-indulgence, neither of which was to be tolerated. Thus far, with a few exceptions attributable to want of practice, Sybil had obeyed her orders to the letter, a success to be credited not solely to the submissive temperament on which Mary relied, but to what had the appearance of adaptability. Either Sybil's oversight of her father's nomadic surroundings had been a less lax experience than seemed possible, or she had a natural capacity for domestic work that was able to substitute improved for antiquated methods. Nor was this availability confined to mere housework. Sybil had a winning way with the children. Both Arnold (they called the boy Arnold already) and Christabel had taken to her at once, and showed no indications of disputing her semblance of authority when left in her charge. This was reassuring, for it would simplify her own occasional absences from home which now seemed imperative.

One such absence had occurred already. The memories of this possessed Mary this evening as she sat and read, though a month had elapsed since the occasion of it. At Henry Thornton's suggestion she had paid a visit to his new estate, the house on which was virtually finished. The owner was occupying it, and Mary found herself one of a week-end party which included the landscape-gardener and also another artist who like herself had been given a roving commission to beautify the grounds. Both of these strangers were from New York. Of course Oliver had been included in the invitation. Mary had longed to have him go; had been doubly sorry that he was prevented when it appeared what he had missed. But the coincidence that he was scheduled to speak on the Saturday evening in question, however annoying, was manifestly a bar, if one granted the reasonableness of his participation in the campaign—

a matter on which she had already said all she intended. She had gone alone, but part way in the same train with Oliver, whose platform engagement was in a part of the State so remote as to forbid his return that night. The children would be safe in the custody of Sybil, whose domestication had been in the nick of time to justify this programme. That her husband and she were setting forth separately gave her after all a certain sense of jubilation, for were they not both going on business? Indeed, save for this, convention would not have sanctioned her paying the visit unattended. And what an illuminating, enlivening experience it had been!

To describe in detail these impressions of Mary's would be merely to portray once more what has been so often done already; the transformation in usages, manners, and point of view then in process all over the country, the accumulated impulse of which was just making itself felt in the community of which Benham was the social pole-star. It was a transformation, the scope and rapidity of which were the result of a conjunction of causes; the most notorious being the stupendous growth of great possessions; but coincident with it and scarcely less potent though more subtle were the revolt against Puritanism, the lukewarm attitude of the rising generation toward orthodox religious observances, the contemporaneous development of automatic vehicles, and the emancipation of woman including a revision of sexual standards. Each was of independent origin, each was more or less entangled with every other, and as a consequence those admitted to behold for the first time the doings of the portion of society actuated by them were certain to be alternately dazzled and shocked. At one moment it might seem that democracy had made enormous strides toward realization of a newly awakened yearning for beauty, at another that it was

doing its best to pulverize and level out the few remaining "thank-you-ma'ams" which impeded the progress of a nation of joy-riders craving an endless stretch of perpetual amusement.

In the new establishment of Henry Thornton, Mary encountered all the innovations with which, either through the medium of personal experience, the press, or the moving-picture shows, a modern sophisticated world has become familiar. Except that it was easy to dazzle or amaze then and requires more ingenuity now, the manifestations were the same. They were novel to her—the spacious, choicely upholstered apartments, the numerous deferential servants, the sumptuous, appetizing cuisine, the perpetuation of floral color within doors, the array of books and magazines, knickknacks and mechanical toys for the edification of the weary and the relief of ennui; she had never assisted at anything of the kind before, yet after the first gasp of bewilderment she accepted the conglomeration with the composure of the good American always prepared for translation to a different sphere. This did not prevent her from picturing to herself what her mother's emotions would have been at such a daily exhibit, nor from overruling her in the main on the old ground of subsequent growth. Mary was prepared in a sense for what she beheld. America had developed—blossomed out. She had no wish to imitate the display, still less to vie with it. But why ignore its reality or its glamour? It was a recognized mode of living—not the best, nor the one suited to her and Oliver, but a phase of modern conditions, and as such to be tactfully praised, though with reserve.

Viewed as a mere symbol of materialistic splendor, Henry Thornton's country palace interested her but mildly. So far as it catered to sensual pleasures—mere

eating and drinking—the atmosphere was uncongenial. But looking at it as an expression of human endeavor to perpetuate the beautiful—and what was the underlying motive of the entire establishment but this?—she took a vivid interest in everything. Mary had experienced no difficulty during her stay in living up to this differentiation. She was there on equal terms as a friend, but primarily as an artist, not a pleasure-loving guest. Accustomed to eat only so long as she was hungry, she let many of the elaborate, highly seasoned dishes pass untasted. She abstained as elsewhere from wine and every form of stimulant—not even tempted. Much of the conversation was volatile. The voices of the youngest people—there were a number between eighteen and twenty-five—were most audible. They did their best to guide the conversation, confining it to sport and to badinage, unintelligible to all except themselves. After meals two of the women smoked. Mary observed them with mild curiosity. She was not horrified, though she disapproved. She had once experimented in secret with a cigarette and been repelled. No moral principle was involved—only taste—and the practice had no charm for her. Why cavil where there was so much else to admire? Or concern herself that outdoor games of one sort or another and tearing about the country in the host's automobiles seemed all that most of the guests cared for? There was nothing ascetic in her composition. At the right moment she would have enjoyed exercise in the invigorating autumn weather no less keenly than the most athletic woman there. But here was an occasion when to be so absorbed in sport as to be blind to the beauty of the surroundings seemed profanation.

Mary derived much pleasure from the society of the two visiting architects, especially from that of her rival, a young man not far from her own age who had recently

won his spurs in the East after studying abroad. He talked delightfully, openly, and without a touch of condescension, making no disguise of his enthusiasm concerning the opportunities for embellishment while they made a tour of the terraces and gardens already laid out. They paused to enjoy the prospect on a broad lawn, already velvety, and not many minutes elapsed before they were in a dell and treading to the cadence of a live brook the decaying glories of foliage which in summer would nearly shut out the sky. Their host and Mr. Tirrell, the supervising architect, supposed to be close behind, were no longer visible. Mary was carrying her leather portfolio, containing her designs for the ornamental terrace seats, with the idea of re-examining them at their future site. When emerging from the dell, the exit of which was to be a water garden, they sat down to await the others, the spirit moved her to show her material to Mr. Ashurst, who had been so companionable. They were not rivals in the strict sense, for his territory was distinct from hers and the arbiter of approval in each instance was Mr. Tirrell.

The suspense was trying, while he examined them in silence. He would feel obliged to say something complimentary—for having thrown them at his head, as it were, she could not hope for complete candor if he failed to like them. But she relied on her ability to detect his real opinion beneath the surface of disingenuous praise. When at last he turned to her, the very frankness of his words seemed to leave no room for doubt as to his honesty.

“It’s extraordinary—and shall I say almost discouraging to those who, like myself, have spent much time in preparation—that you with so little training and with so few opportunities for artistic development—admissions from your own lips—should be able to pro-

duce such original and beautiful work. This means only one thing, Mrs. Randall, that you possess talent which by practice may prove very exceptional. I shall be more than proud if my share in what we are attempting to do is equally successful."

It was essential for her to keep her head clear and to beware of the wiles of flattery. Possibly Mr. Ashurst had exaggerated a trifle because he did not choose to forget that she was a woman. But she could not doubt his fundamental sincerity. He was so psychological, so discriminating, so humble. His praise meant merely that in this particular instance she had risen to the height which the occasion demanded and thereby justified the hope that she might do remarkable work on a large scale hereafter to which superlatives could properly be applied. She was not able to resist feeling elated by his judgment.

Her interview with Mr. Tirrell which took place later in the day had not diminished Mary's satisfaction, though his felicitations were less outspoken. He was more dispassionate and reticent by nature, as became an expert of his maturity and responsibilities. She derived the impression that he would have said more but for the ardor of her patron who constituted himself her showman. "Admirable. I leave it to you, Mr. Tirrell, if they're not just what we were waiting for. Take this, for instance; when the newness is rubbed off, it will be easy to believe it was dug out of some old Italian garden. And on that, I can picture a Capulet or a Montague reclining *dolce far niente*, eating pomegranates in the shade."

Such unreserved eulogy left little to be said unless the arbiter should be clearly of the opinion that the designs were unsuitable. Mary had realized that the situation was awkward for Mr. Tirrell, and had not been chilled

by the meagreness of his approval. For, though his words seemed lukewarm in comparison with the praise just listened to, it was clear that he intended to accept the designs. She tried afterward to recall his exact phraseology. Excepting nods of acquiescence, the most tangible contribution was that they were very pretty and with a few alterations would be in harmony with the general scheme of ornamentation. He would like to look them over at his leisure and make some trifling suggestions.

Henry Thornton evidently took his adviser's accord for granted, for at the first opportunity he continued: "It's a satisfaction to me to see my prognostications verified. It goes without saying that I don't pretend to erudition in matters artistic, that's why I've employed you, Mr. Tirrell. But this does not mean, necessarily—does it—inability to distinguish talent when one encounters it? Nor that one may not discover it under one's very nose, so to speak. While I recognize the necessity of relying mainly on what, for lack of a better word, we must call outside talent, I shall take constant pride in the knowledge that some of the prettiest features here are the work of one whom I have known all my life."

Having concluded this speech, which was addressed to the architect, by turning toward her and bowing gallantly, he added for her private ear: "I've a new opening for you whenever time hangs heavy. Clifford Palmer and his wife, fired by my example, are planning something in the same line, but on a reduced scale. And they're bent on consulting you."

The Clifford Palmers were among the guests who had preferred automobiling that morning. But they were fashionable, and Mrs. Palmer, because of her interest in current live issues, was almost a personage. Were

Mary to succeed in pleasing them, others of their set would be likely to employ her. How considerate and friendly Henry Thornton had shown himself! Why did he not marry? The only lack of this notable establishment was a charming mistress. In remembering that she herself might have been enthroned there, she was conscious of being further than ever from regret. All this circumstance would have hampered and distracted if it had not enervated her. But a woman of less initiative might well be content to bask in the sunshine of consummate opulence as the helpmate of a modern Mæcenas. Henry certainly must marry. And since he would not choose, she must try to do so for him.

In casting about for the right person, she had thought of Sybil Fielding, and the suggestion lingered. Sybil certainly had many of the requisite qualifications. She was exactly suited to be the wife of a rich man. A cosey creature who liked to be petted and who doted on amusement, all the manifestations of luxury would appeal to her immensely; and under the sunshine of prosperity she could be counted on to bloom and adorn the position. Might not this be the long-desired solution for them both? She resolved that at least she would seek expedients for throwing them together.

She had returned from her visit in a glowing frame of mind. Her horizon had been enlarged and enriched; she had been edified as well as entertained; but not at the expense of her principles or point of view. She prided herself on having been able to distinguish between the symbols of beauty and those of mere vanity. Her work had been accepted and her prospects for employment in an increasingly wide field were rosy. That she had considerable talent there would seem to be no question. She felt in a rare mood; one which prompted

her to throw prudence to the winds and give herself up completely to the joy of relaxation and of acknowledging how supremely happy she was. She had enraptured Oliver by the exultant flow of her spirits, by the openness of her desire for endearments. She rejoiced in being for once the wooer. This was a festival in their procession of happy days; one of the few great occasions when the cup of life was to be drained in token of the joy of living. She rejoiced in the opportunity to let him see at a fitting moment her ardor in rising to ineffable heights and revealing her completeness as a woman.

Several weeks had now elapsed since her return from "Foxgrove." As she reviewed in retrospect these experiences while turning the pages of her book, Mary smiled at her peace of mind. It was essential that she should soon make other excursions from home; not merely to visit her Italian garden, but the Palmer property so that she could advise intelligently. It was obvious from the steady murmur of conversation close by that Oliver had found an indulgent listener. Whenever she fixed her attention on what they were saying, it was still politics; and he was doing most of the talking. How fortunate, for this seemed to argue that they would get on well together and their inability to do so had been among the possibilities. Oliver might have disliked Sybil as an inmate at short range and then the domestic experiment would have proved a failure. As it was, she could slip away now and then without fear that he would miss her unduly or be bored by her substitute.

The volume which Mary happened to be reading was Maeterlinck's "The Bee," a book which Mr. Ashurst had spoken of and which she had procured from the library. She had virtually finished the contents already and this evening was simply turning the pages as a cloak for reverie. It had interested her intensely—this strange,

absorbing chronicle of feminine industry and supremacy. In that queer but authenticated insect world the females were the consecrated workers, the males were drones save for the single purpose of race perpetuation—a dizzying flight which culminated in death. Mary smiled again at the memory of the fantastic trick thus perpetrated by nature. If to masculine intelligence this snuffing out of the male seemed a wholly anomalous caprice, was not this partly because of its topsyturvy contrast to the human status where the female was not infrequently doomed to die to recruit the race, and had been habituated for centuries to dance attendance on her mate and preen herself in comparative idleness for his delectation? Surely in the experiences of the ill-fated drone, nature was laughing in her sleeve at the inequalities of the human relation.

The clock struck eleven; time had flown. It was getting late and the others were still talking. Their topic was evident the moment she paid attention; Oliver was discoursing on the momentous theme of primaries and Sybil was listening with the well-feigned absorption of one who pretends interest in a topic dry as sawdust. All was as it should be. It would never occur to Sybil that she ought not to make the effort; to do so was part of her old-fashioned education; to pretend successfully would amuse her and beguile Oliver. Mary closed her Maeterlinck with a snap of satisfaction.

“Do you realize the hour?” she said. “You children have never stopped talking. I caught a few words now and again and they always had to do with caucuses or platforms. Oliver must have had a glorious time, and you, Sybil, ought to be wiser than an owl.”

CHAPTER XI

THE evening spent with Sybil reconciled Oliver to her presence as an inmate of the household. Her sympathy regarding the recent political disaster established their relations on a new footing which presently developed into a sort of Freemasonry. So preoccupied had he been during the first few weeks of her stay that he had barely noticed her. She was harmless enough; agreeably quiet at meals; she attended to her duties, and said very little. After he was free to observe he was struck by her success with the children. It was her province at the breakfast-table to see that they ate enough and not too much, so as to leave Mary at liberty to read her correspondence. They seemed to obey her willingly, but her method was the reverse of authoritative. Though always propitiatory, she somehow managed to carry her point without the aid of coercion.

His fear that she would be in the way had thus far proved groundless, for his opportunities for being alone with Mary were ample. On one plausible excuse or another Sybil was very apt to absent herself from the parlor a portion of the evening. That she was a cosey, tactful little person—affable, but not forthputting—would have summarized his tacit estimate of her just prior to the date when she had disclosed her interest in politics.

As to the quality of this interest—whether it was deep-rooted or superficial—Oliver made no conjecture. It sufficed that it was ostensibly genuine at the time, and that it did not die out. He was encouraged to

volunteer information or prophecy concerning current events because he found an eager listener, who led him on by increasingly pertinent questions. Considering her colossal ignorance, which continued at times to make him laugh and which she deplored by shrugging her shoulders in woeful despair, it was surprising what progress she made. Instead of being obliged to explain everything, it was not long before he was able to take for granted her familiarity with certain measures and individuals. So catholic was her relish that even such unmistakably dry material as the context of new primary laws awakened her enthusiasm. She seemed curious as to the details of political machinery and remembered tenaciously what he told her, so that he rarely was obliged to explain a second time. If he was, she was disarmingly contrite and apologetic. And he continued to notice how quickly she apprehended when he forecast live issues and outlined his views as to party policy. While she accepted everything he said with a novice's propensity to applaud, he was constantly impressed by the ease with which she bridged the chasm which lay between former postulates and new ideas. It was clear that in certain ways she was more quick-witted than he had supposed.

Mary, too, was more than content with the turn of affairs. It was in the line of her expectations. That Oliver should be won over was indispensable to the success of her scheme, and Sybil's political fervor seemed to be the key which fitted this lock. Nor did it disturb Mary that she surmised Sybil's fervor to be manufactured—hence disingenuous; but not deliberately so. A trait in Sybil noticeable since childhood—her constant desire to please—was responsible for a frame of mind able to turn on enthusiasm as water from a tap, without suspicion that it was make-believe. That Sybil was

doing her household work so creditably was partially to be traced—thus Mary argued—to this same impulse, the desire to make a record. There was little fault to be found with her administration now that she understood what was expected of her. She did what she was told and she had improved with practice. That her forte was imitation not initiative had its advantages—could be counted a virtue under the circumstances—for it prevented unwelcome innovations.

It looked to Mary as if Sybil in order to get on the right side of Oliver had managed to persuade herself that she was genuinely afflicted by the defeat of Governor Bonner, despite not caring a straw. Such a motive, however second-rate as a mainspring to endeavor, was pardonable under the circumstances. Sybil was anxious to get on; it was essential that she should produce a pleasant impression on Oliver, thereby making surer of her position. Mary would have felt contemptuous of Sybil's pretenses but for Sybil's necessities. As it was, she had no disposition to cavil; was merely a little amused. She did not begrudge Sybil the zest of the self-deception nor Oliver his beguilement. The situation was working itself out exactly as it ought in order to be advantageous to all concerned. Why should not Oliver reap the benefit of this delusion which had all the effect of spontaneity? With some one else ever ready to listen to political details, she herself would be in a large measure relieved from paying heed to them. Why, also, should not Sybil be encouraged to become practically useful to Oliver?

This last suggestion was prompted by the reappearance of good old Everett Dean, who had taken it into his head to haunt the house again; the occasion being, in the lingo of Oliver, the necessity of mending political fences, an occupation which might seemingly have been

postponed. The next election was nearly a year off; and Oliver, in view of all his exertions, was clearly entitled to be let alone for the present. Shy and elusive where women were concerned, Everett Dean when brought to bay continued to show himself bluntly uncompromising. Having nearly collided with him one evening in the hall, she had detained him long enough to vent her feelings by saying: "Seeing that your party failed to win, don't you think you monopolized too much of my husband's time this autumn?" She had uttered her gentle hint gayly, of course, so as not to appear antagonistic. But his reply had been characteristically perverse.

"By no means, Mrs. Randall, by no means. And we expect to go on monopolizing it more and more."

This was almost brutal, and she had been unable to resist the retort: "Not, I trust, when you are sure to be beaten and every one knows it. That would be scarcely fair."

Her words must have given him food for thought; let him see that she disapproved of his assiduities. And her last remark ought to have hit home if his sensibilities were not hidebound. Yet his calls continued, so she said one day: "I dare say Sybil would have time to help you with those voting lists, Ollie, if you would care to have her." Might not a feminine assistant have the effect of frightening the monopolizer away?

"If I only could! I should find the time easily," Sybil exclaimed, then gasped at her effrontery and added: "I should make too many mistakes, I fear, and be an encumbrance instead of a helper."

"At first possibly; but it would be chiefly copying, I assume, and doing exactly what you were told. You know shorthand, and your typewriter is up-stairs."

"Yes. How lucky I didn't sell it when I moved here,

as I thought of doing. But my shorthand is horribly rusty."

"Oliver will make allowances; he won't expect perfection. If I were mixed up in politics and it was important to economize time, I should jump at the chance of securing a secretary always on the premises."

"I am jumping. It's a capital idea now that I've got used to it. That is if Sybil says so." While listening to the dialogue Oliver had passed from surprise to a sort of suppressed enthusiasm on the lookout for some flaw in such an agreeable but unlooked-for arrangement.

"If you really think I could be useful."

"I'm sure of it. Hasn't Mary shown us how? A secretary on the premises is just what is needed. I was saying to Everett Dean only a few days ago that a good part of what we old stagers at the game are doing is really clerical work which should be handed over to an assistant. He agreed, but said he guessed we had better struggle along this year. Now that I've discovered—or rather my ingenious wife has—the way out, I'll give him a surprise." Thereupon Oliver left the room and reappeared presently from the den bearing a roll of documents which he proceeded to undo with a complacent air.

"You might as a starter make a clean draft of these on your machine; in duplicate, then we shall each have a copy free from erasures to mull over. Take all the time you need though."

"How exciting! I'll promise to be very careful," said Sybil, stooping to inspect her task.

Mary, watching them as they bent their heads over the papers, smiled at the success of her ruse and murmured: "One of the advantages may be that Everett Dean will not ring our door-bell quite so frequently just as we are thinking of bed."

"It's the thing of all others I should enjoy doing and it would never have occurred to me to think of it," softly articulated Sybil in modest rapture. "I wish I were like that—able to suggest things. Ingenious is just the word, Oliver. I'm a mere performing doll compared with Mary; she has so many ideas. In fact I think I have the right to feel pretty proud that I am in the same house with two people of such talents."

"That gives us the opening—doesn't it, Ollie?—to say that we have become very dependent on her. You perform your part so well, Sybil dear, that we are constantly tempted to shift more responsibility to your shoulders."

"That's a fact. But we mustn't overload them—especially with my concerns."

"Leave that to us, Ollie," replied Mary, smiling archly. "Sybil and I understand each other; there is no danger. All she is doing thus far and all she is proposing to do is entirely consistent with what she undertook. But it's pleasant to have the chance to let her know that we appreciate her efficiency. As a sign of it I am planning to leave you to yourselves day after to-morrow—just for twenty-four hours. I must spend that time with the Clifford Palmers so as to get their ideas and inspect the site they have chosen."

That there could be any risk or impropriety in thus absenting herself never occurred to Mary. Her absolute confidence in Oliver's moral integrity and in the singleness and depth of his devotion precluded the possibility of such a thought arising. The speculation would have seemed an indignity to her own self-respect and disloyal to him. She did not regard her action even as unconventional so manifestly natural and convenient did it appear. Was it not infinitely preferable to intrust a husband's comfort to an intimate friend whose

solicitude could be relied on than to an every-day domestic who might take advantage of the absence of the mistress to neglect him? What others did or refrained from doing was always negligible to Mary if the benefits of the opposite course were clearly apparent. She believed that as an American woman she was at liberty to ignore the restraints of usage at suitable moments and not to conjure up and guard against evil of which there were no signs.

Nor did Oliver think this strange. Sybil might be a law unto herself; but she was a stickler for the proprieties. It was inconceivable that his relations with his wife's friend could be affected by his being left alone with her. This was what he would have answered had it occurred to him to marvel. As it was, he was not conscious of giving the matter even a passing thought until he saw Sybil sitting opposite to him at the breakfast-table. In order to serve his tea she had slipped into Mary's seat, saying: "Shall I sit here? I suppose I'd better," and without needing to be told was satisfying his requirements as to cream and sugar. Then for the first time he experienced a slight sense of incongruity—of restraint. It seemed to him for a moment as if his wife were dead and he had married again.

But this effect of queerness was only momentary. It was eminently sensible that she should be sitting there. She could command the table more readily and keep a closer eye on the children, whose pinafores she had already fastened and to whose immediate wants she had attended. Yet Oliver caught himself looking at her with the eye of one who detects a difference, but is puzzled to define it. There was no alteration in her attire; none in the way she did her hair. Yet she was not quite the same as yesterday, he was sure of that. In what did the change consist? While he was still puzzled,

she spoke in handing him his cup and the effect was heightened. "You always take tea, don't you?" He knew now; it was a difference of mien. She was less suppressed, more at her ease, as one might appear who, having been kept under, was free from constraint. He noticed that her remark was a blithe assertion rather than an inquiry. Otherwise it would have no point, for she must have seen Mary pass him his tea every morning since her arrival.

"Yes, for some time now. I used to take coffee. I prefer it; but tea agrees with me better."

"Sensible man. I admire you. But I miss my cup of coffee—especially in the morning. Abroad I used to drink it three times a day. It was difficult here at first to go without it."

"But Mary wouldn't object to your having it."

"No, but she would disapprove; and when she disapproves I can't help feeling like a guilty thing if I indulge myself, for her reasons for self-denial are so excellent."

"It's partly a difference of climate. We're a nervous lot over here, and we can't take so many liberties with our systems. But you ought to have your coffee; it's a shame; I'll speak to Mary about it."

"You mustn't; please don't." Sybil glanced around the table as if mindful of the adage as to little pitchers. "Occasionally I do make some—on the sly. Mary knows, for she has seen me. There are lots of things one ought to avoid if one only had the moral courage; things one doesn't really need or which are positively injurious. I'm far too inclined as it is to like what is supposed to be bad for the nerves or the digestion."

"I haven't noticed it."

"That's because Mary keeps us in such good order. If I were left to my own devices I should constantly

break down—eat quantities of sweets and be generally careless. That's one result, I suppose, of living so long abroad. It's difficult to throw off all at once the habit of years. But there's where Mary is so splendid—in never slumping for an instant. It seemed very strange to me though when I first got back."

"What seemed strange?"

"The responsibility which so many women over here feel as to keeping men up to the mark. Regulating their tastes, I mean. I wasn't used to it. My mother being dead, I naturally tried to have everything just as I thought my father wished and expected, and the attitude of all the foreigners I met was the same. That is the men seemed to expect to do whatever they chose except the detestable things—and sometimes even those—while the women's chief concern was to provide them with what they liked and to appear to like, even if they didn't, the things their husbands cared for. But of course that may tend to spoil the men and to make them selfish."

"Yes, it tends to drag a man down if he isn't careful. Don't you think the other is the better way? That it conduces more to happiness, and the right sort of companionship if a woman is a prop instead of a mere echo or adulator?"

"Undoubtedly. They all say so—the clever women over here. But it sometimes makes me shiver."

"Shiver?" Oliver laughed protectingly in repeating her phrase. Not certain that he understood why she should be dismayed, he put the obvious construction on it by adding: "Europe hasn't a monopoly of the old-fashioned kind of women, if that's what you mean. There are some left on this side of the water."

"Yes. But they've got to change if they hope to hold their husbands and their fathers and their brothers."

"I don't know about that. We were talking about the ideal woman, weren't we?"

"Not at all. Of course but few of us can hope to be Marys. Or if we were, doesn't every woman cherish the hope that at some time she may be some man's ideal? It may be a slim chance, but it's always possible. So you see it includes us all."

To Oliver's logical and lucid mind this sounded sophistical. But he was much diverted. He was unused to dialogue of this sort at breakfast.

"You needn't worry," he declared gallantly.

"You're consoling. But it isn't that; you misunderstood me. What makes me shiver is the responsibility."

"Responsibility?"

"Yes. The thought of it appalls me. Are you ready for another cup of tea?" The abruptness of the transition was explained by her solicitude, as though she were self-convicted of carelessness in failing to anticipate his wants. Oliver found himself hesitating. He was not accustomed to take two. Such a thing was never suggested by Mary. Glancing down, he saw that, though he had finished his tea, there was still food on his plate which he would have eaten but for the conversation.

"Why, thank you, I don't mind if I do."

As she supplied him with a second cup Oliver reflected that this side of her was new to him. What had called it forth? If only Mary were there to listen. But Mary must be aware of it. Sybil was certainly more of a person—more wide-awake and observing than he had given her credit for. In her own modest, retiring way to be sure. The point she had been making was interesting, a sort of defense in the line of apology for her own lack of initiative. But she was bright. He was conscious that in listening to her he had lingered over his breakfast longer than usual.

"I just simply couldn't keep my eye on a man so as to prevent him from doing the things he ought not to; be on the watch continuously to ask myself: 'Is this good for him; won't that tend to undermine his system?' Besides I should certainly come to grief, for every now and then I should be capable of setting him such a terribly poor example. Is your tea sweet enough?"

"Exactly right, thank you." After stirring it he had noticed that it was agreeably sweeter than usual.

"But I suppose I've got to try—at least to pretend—unless I wish to be regarded as dreadfully antiquated. You may run away, children." Glancing at the clock as she spoke, she exclaimed with contrition: "Here's a pitiful example of how little I could be trusted—of how lax I am—in having detained you from your office to listen to my chatter. What would Mary say? And my not meaning to wouldn't be the slightest excuse in her eyes. With a wife like that no man could go far astray."

At her words Oliver hastily drew out his watch. He was aware it was getting late, but he found he had dallied even longer than he supposed. He rose with the promptness of guilt.

"Yes; isn't she perfectly fine!" he said. Having paid this spontaneous tribute to Mary, he waited to add: "But you're not responsible for me."

"That's just the trouble. She would claim that I am."

"I see; I dare say she would," he replied gayly. "Well I'm off; I'll hurry."

He went on his way amused. Technically she was justified in blaming herself, but he would exonerate her by arriving on time for his engagements after all. No one could contend that she was not looking after him famously in every other respect. And how lively she

was, with just an agreeable spice of roguishness. It pleased him, too, that she showed such unreserved admiration for Mary.

Oliver was so tired when he reached home that afternoon that he had virtually forgotten his wife's absence. It was a fresh surprise to find Sybil waiting to receive him. There was nothing forced in her welcome. The fire was burning brightly, she was presiding over the urn, but it was obviously too late for tea—not far from the dinner-hour in fact. She did not press him when he declined; simply let him alone; he was glad of that. A less tactful woman might not have refrained from making a fuss over him; pestering him by questions with the idea of making herself agreeable. Sybil simply sat there with a pleasant expression as if she had nothing more congenial on earth to do than survey the teacups and shining silver. She seemed to divine that he did not care to talk. In a moment she had glided from her seat at the tea-table, poking up the fire on the way, to a corner of the sofa and proceeded to unfold a huge piece of ornamental needlework.

He had seated himself mechanically on entering, intending to go up-stairs the moment decency would permit. After all, these preparations were partially for him. As he dallied out of compliment the temperate warmth of the room detained him. Afternoon tea was an intermittent household function. When in the mood, Mary prepared it, more commonly she did not. But on the occasions when he had reached home in time to assist, she had come in shortly before and the fire was hardly lighted if at all. But now his curiosity was aroused. His wife took tea when she was fatigued, but she never did ornamental needlework. He could not recall having seen her thus occupied. She sewed, and not infrequently; she was expert with her needle; she could

mend her own dresses—make them, if necessary. But such an elaborate piece of work as this—a huge expanse of canvas stitched with variegated lustrous silks—was a novelty in the house. It took him back to his youth. His mother—or was it his grandmother?—used to do worsted screens or tops for footstools. But nothing so extensive or brilliant as this. Sybil's head was bent over her lap; she held up two long skeins to the light and hesitated between them. From that portion of the tapestry which lay nearest his foot Oliver distinguished that the design was a landscape—a foreign scene; sombre yew-trees, an evergreen hedge, a terrace with ornamental urns, all portrayed by the judicious blending of different shades of green picked in with complementary colors. Having never seen anything just like it, Oliver could not resist drawing his chair closer and lifting the end nearest him.

Sybil, having selected her skein, smiled at him as she threaded her needle. "Do you think it's pretty?"

"Stunning. What is it? What's it for?"

"A table-cloth, maybe. That is if I ever finish it."

"Is there much more to do?"

"Reams." As she spoke she undid for an instant for his benefit the folds of the stamped pattern still to be filled in.

"It'll be glorious when it's finished; all outdoors in silk. But how long have you been at work on this?"

"I began it centuries ago. You're supposed to be gazing at a bit of Tuscany."

"And how long before you expect to finish it?"

"An eternity. It's draggy work. I bring it out every now and then when I'm in the humor and do a little. It suits me because it's leisurely and one has merely to be very careful."

Oliver watched her study the canvas with deliberation,

ply her needle for a stitch or two, then pause to observe the effect. "You're right. It will take you a lifetime. Has Mary ever seen it?"

"Oh, yes!" she responded with a soft laugh. "Mary was good enough to admire it—er—artistically; but it irritates her. She regards it as such a frightful waste of time. I suppose it is. So generally I work on it when she isn't by." Sybil looked up with a roguish, furtive smile, as much as to say that, having put herself at his mercy by taking him into her confidence, she relied on him not to tell.

They dined alone, for the children, of course, were in bed. It was still strange, but it had ceased to seem inappropriate that she should be sitting opposite him. Where else should she sit? She was in a reminiscent mood. Through bending over her Tuscan landscape, her thoughts had flown across the water. A reference to her life abroad enabled Oliver by a few assisting inquiries to lead her from one to another intimate impression concerning it. She had been homesick for Europe when she first returned, but she no longer desired to reside there; she had become a good American. She was convinced that the people of the United States were the most capable and the most ingenuous of all. The Old World nations of the Latin race—the rank and file and sometimes those higher up—were, like their diplomacy, very polite and very ceremonious, but would overreach you if they could. There were moments, however, when she missed the foreign atmosphere, the transatlantic point of view; the Latin's innate love of beauty, his tempestuous ardor; the entrancing landscape itself, the vines, the olives, and the sunny slopes. She had passed three winters in Capri, that enchanted isle of cerulean grottos and airy precipices. Her father had painted every inch of it. She loved that marvellous

coast of southern Italy where the winds and the sky and the sea had entered into a holy alliance to concoct a paradise in which half-clad happy mortals could exist by simply being lazy.

“Here beneath her mulberry-trees
Sits Amalfi in the heat
Bathing ever her white feet
In the tideless summer seas.”

So she quoted fondly, then added in response to his appreciative expression: “A countryman of ours wrote that—Longfellow.”

“And I remember the place so well,” he exclaimed eagerly. “That was one of the red-letter days of our walking trip—when Everett Dean and I tramped through Europe just after graduation. It was sheer happiness merely to be alive, looking out over the shimmering Mediterranean. And one marvelled that Amalfi, where everything but nature seemed asleep, was centuries ago a bustling port of commerce, mistress of the seas, protector from the Saracen, the predecessor of Genoa and Venice.”

Sybil kindled in turn at his rhetoric. “You thought of that of course. I was told so once, but it immediately slipped from my mind. There’s where men are different. You were interested in the rise and fall of nations even then.”

“I may have known—being fresh from history exams. Likely as not I read it in the guide-book.”

“But you always meant to go into politics, didn’t you?”

“I don’t believe so. Well, I won’t say quite that; politics have always had a fascination for me; that is, the ups and downs of parties.”

"Which surely are synonymous in the long run with the rise and fall of nations. And that reminds me." So saying, Sybil rose from table. Dinner was over. Oliver was smiling with amusement at her specious attempts to pin him down by sophistry. Evidently content with her logic, she glided past him in furtherance of some definite purpose.

Oliver walked into the den and mechanically filled his pipe. Again the meal had diverted him. His wife's friend was certainly a vivacious little woman, and at the same time did not her personality involve contradictions? Her effect of helplessness was misleading since her proficiency in various arts was no longer in doubt. Moreover where his ambition was concerned she understood what he was aiming at and did not disguise her envy of his masculine opportunities; her interest operated as a spur. Yet, though capable of exertion when necessary, she had just given him glimpses of another self which under different auspices had found the zest of life in sheer supineness; it had been enough for her to sit with folded hands and accept what the gods had to bestow. Perhaps she had returned to her native land—been retransplanted—just in time. Yet she had brought back with her something elusive yet definite which was undeniably charm and whose impulse—if so still a force could be called an impulse—was just this creed of passivity at the foundation of woman's nature. She was the antipodes in this respect of all the women his better self had taught him to admire.

These musings, which merely represented the desire of a straightforward mind for classification, were interrupted by a gentle rap on the panel of the open door. Oliver had not heard her approach. There she stood with an apologetic air as if fearful of intruding.

"May I come in?" She exhibited a handful of type-written pages. "I went to fetch these; I've finished what you gave me."

"So soon?" He took them and as he automatically sorted them noticed that the work was neatly done. "They look first-rate. You could give points to some professionals."

"You haven't discovered the mistakes yet. But I'm not quite a novice. There was a time, you remember, when I thought I should be dependent on this for my bread and butter. There are two or three places which I was doubtful about; it's my stupidity, of course; I've left spaces."

"Show me," he said, wheeling in his chair so as to command the light at the desk. As she leaned over his shoulder to explain, Oliver instinctively started to extinguish his pipe; otherwise at close range the fumes would annoy her.

"Don't do that," she protested. "I was brought up in a smoky atmosphere; I'm seasoned. You must light it again." As he hesitated, she added: "I used to fill my father's pipe."

He laughed gayly. "Did you? Perhaps you'll give me an exhibition of how it ought to be done."

By means of a few swift glances around her, Sybil procured the materials without aid. Reaching for his pipe she portioned out the tobacco and stuffed it in deftly, levelling the surface of the bowl. "And now the match," she said. She proffered one lighted and Oliver puffed gratefully. "Perfect," he said. "It draws like a furnace."

To point out the ambiguities in the copy did not take long. In every case but one Sybil's inquiry was justified, and in regard to the single instance she showed herself disarmingly contrite. They branched off to larger as-

pects of the matter in hand—the prospects for next year, the probable controlling issues; mainly a monologue, but Oliver felt encouraged to talk. By this time the room was clouded. Despite her daintiness, she sat there as if she enjoyed the smoke; betraying no more signs of repugnance than another man. He could not help wondering if she really did like it or was pretending. Yet, as she had declared, one could become seasoned to the odor of tobacco if so disposed.

There could be no question, however, as to the genuineness of her interest in what he was saying. This was further attested by the act of drawing in her breath, a close resemblance of a sigh, as she rose and said: "I'm going to leave you now. You have work to do." Plainly she would have liked to stay longer, but she spoke very firmly. She had anticipated his conscience. Some women in her shoes would have lingered on chattering until he was obliged to hint that he had important matters to think out. She certainly had the right conception of taking care of him. Pleased by her tact, he bowed her across the threshold; she closed the door behind her and he was left to his own devices.

In another moment Oliver was deep in his law papers. The points which he was considering were abstruse and demanded unflagging attention. Lost to consciousness of everything but his task, he worked late. Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was past midnight. He had solved his difficulties; it was time to go to bed if he wished to be fresh in the morning.

As he opened the door of the den he was surprised to see that the lights in the parlor were still burning. Sybil must have forgotten to put them out. Crossing the hall in the expectation of finding the room vacant, he discovered her in full possession, sewing peacefully on the needlework, which encompassed her like a sea of drapery.

She looked up at his step and started to gather up her materials.

"Not gone yet? Do you realize what hour it is?"

The clock on the mantelpiece stared her in the face. "Is it late? It was so quiet here that pottering over this I lost all run of time. See, I've done a lot." She paused in her folding to point out how much.

"But I fear you won't bless me in the morning for setting you such a poor example."

"Indeed I shall" she replied as she swathed her handiwork in its outer covering, then tucked the compact bundle under her arm. "No, thank you, it's nothing to carry. I'll tell you a secret; when left to myself I'm a regular night-owl. I just love turning night into day."

Sybil spoke as one enamoured of a pernicious propensity. Nevertheless Oliver trudged up-stairs behind her, nursing the conviction that her vigil had been by way of keeping her compact with Mary. She had agreed to look after him and she had reasoned that he might need something. Unlikely yet not impossible at such an hour. But she must be told that such laborious devotion was not expected of her and was wholly uncalled for. Still the needlessness of the performance only enhanced the lustre of such intrinsic loyalty. It was fortunate all round that Mary had hit upon such a jewel.

CHAPTER XII

MARY returned the following day in radiant spirits. She had learned at "Foxgrove" that Mr. Tirrell had sent back her designs with his approval and a few minor modifications. The garden seats were to be constructed immediately. With this affair concluded, she had put herself at the disposal of the Clifford Palmers. She had inspected their site, and after an hour's heart-to-heart talk with Mrs. Palmer, had been asked to assume entire charge of the landscape-garden features of their project. An architect for the house had already been engaged, who had submitted plans. While looking these over she had taken the liberty of offering a few suggestions with an eye to ampler closet space and other domestic conveniences, which elicited the remark: "You're simply wonderful, I only wish I had known of you sooner." Mary had recounted her experience in apartment-houses and added: "It has always seemed to me that an intelligent woman ought to be far better qualified than a man to know what another woman would like in the way of household conveniences." After musing on this for a moment her listener had replied: "I don't see why you're not the very person for my sister Carrie—Mrs. Gregory Walworth of Pittsburgh. She's building too, and is crazy about woman's work. As president of the local Equal Suffrage League she could report progress if she were able to say that, excepting the manual labor, there isn't a square inch in her house for which a man is entitled to the credit."

This significant allusion had opened a new vista. The Jerrold twins, orphan daughters of Vice-Admiral Jerrold, originally denizens of Washington, quick-witted, vivacious but penniless, had bettered the family fortunes by their respective marriages in Pittsburgh and Benham. By virtue of their mental traits, which like their faces and figures were nearly identical, each had established already a position for herself among the younger matrons of the community as a wide-awake hostess, ready to pounce on every new idea in order to exploit it. Their social proclivities foreshadowed the establishment in each of their new houses of an aureate cave of the winds where the newest synonym of progress could be sumptuously lodged overnight and dismissed next morning, and where on gala occasions all the latest impulses could be fêted collectively and introduced to one another.

Though they were but just over thirty, the fame of the Jerrold sisters—their cleverness in turning two brilliant matches to such serviceable account—was among the social flotsam which had drifted into the knowledge of every alert woman in the country. Mary had read in the newspapers of Mrs. Gregory Walworth. Though the name of the twin, Mrs. Clifford Palmer (Deborah), had been very familiar ever since the significance of the social renaissance in Benham had first dawned on her, they had never met until the occasion of the house-party at Henry Thornton's. She impressed Mary as emulous (as indeed she was) to combine the sportive with the intellectual life, as if to reveal her emancipation from narrowness and an all-round capacity for sampling everything human. Mary had been puzzled momentarily at "Foxgrove" by her preferring an automobile ride to the opportunity for stimulating conversation afforded by the presence of the two New York architects. But

when it appeared that Mrs. Palmer had met them previously, and that the lure was the very latest model of high-speed car, she understood better; for the aphorism that a clever woman never needs to suck an orange more than once was already a part of Mary's consciousness. The hour's heart-to-heart talk convinced her that she and Deborah Palmer were birds of a feather, with simply the difference that the other woman's plumage was gaudier. She felt they were mates in their eagerness for truth and zest for feminine opportunity.

Though she returned home in a conqueror's frame of mind, which implied preoccupation, Mary did not neglect to scrutinize her domestic surroundings. She did not expect to find cause for criticism, but she wished to make sure. She discovered by a glance that she had not been unduly missed. She could detect no symptom of disaffection in either Oliver or the children. On the contrary, when she inquired casually, "How did Sybil manage?" she was impressed by the heartiness of her husband's reply: "Everything went smoothly. She's a trump; and much more interesting as a companion than I anticipated."

This was as it should be. The absent treatment, supplemented by vanity, had sufficed to keep Sybil up to the mark. "Oh, yes," she replied. "Sybil has naturally a good mind; she certainly had before she let it lie fallow. And when she chooses to put her best foot forward, she can be very agreeable. I'm glad she rose to the occasion." The way was now clear for occasional absences from home, which were more than ever on the cards; and if she were summoned to Pittsburgh, they would need at times to be longer. Mary felt decidedly in a flutter. What she had dreamed might happen was apparently coming true; and she must face the impending predicament. Her hands were full; there was more

than a possibility that she would presently be swamped with work; if she were employed by Mrs. Walworth, her vogue would cease to be local. Was not the time approaching when it might be necessary to reconsider the determination not to accept more orders than she could personally execute; when it might seem desirable to employ draftsmen and set up an office? This major temptation was not to be entertained so long as the scope of her work did not suffer by resisting it. She resolved to compromise by intrusting various details to a young woman whom she had known during her novitiate at the Art School and who now occupied a studio in one of Mr. Mitchell's apartments. To leave her home altogether during the daytime, or even to isolate herself within it, after the method of Barbara Ford, would inevitably jar on Oliver. With all his progressive tendencies he was scarcely prepared for this, poor lamb. Yet, but for the children, she would not hesitate, assuming that it seemed wise to accept the invitation, to spread her wings thus far. For Oliver could be counted on to accustom himself ultimately to the idea; and to rely on the superintendence of another inmate of the house for comfortable shelter and food would be merely an extension of the principle that circumstances frequently sanctified the continuous presence of a parent-in-law.

But the care of children was a different proposition. They were a sacred trust, the most precious fruits of human experience. To manage them by proxy through another woman who was neither kith nor kin not merely involved a risk which tore at Mary's heart-strings, but would rob her of a privilege which she was already beginning to delight in. Mary had prided herself on keeping abreast of the times regarding early education. To lay the foundations of religious faith so as to obviate

a cruel awakening later, or to broach successfully such a delicate but vital topic as sex hygiene, were samples of tasks which could not be delegated to others without twinges of conscience which must invite remorse. Here was where she envied Barbara Ford, whose husband had voluntarily shouldered the responsibility; whereas the limitation in her own case was obvious. Oliver must go down-town daily; his leisure was absorbed by politics; with the result that the responsibility in question became wholly hers. If she had known when she married that her gift was to cause this embarrassment, she might have proposed terms. As it was, it was too late. A division of superintendence of the children would grate on Oliver; indeed, would he not be helpless? The most she could hope was to make him understand more clearly what she was giving up by limiting her career. That he had still only a dim conception of the significance of her progress was shown by the fixity of his impression that her art was a pastime. Her series of successes had not shaken it. She was determined to correct this at the first opportunity by taking him to task so unequivocally that there could be no further excuse for his blindness.

Moreover, since she must abridge her work as an architect, she would at least intimate, notwithstanding it was too late, that he ought to share with her the responsibility for the children and make an effort to equip himself to assist in their mental and moral nurture if the domestic triumvirate was to continue to flourish. For there was plainly a point where absent treatment could not be implicitly relied on, and they as parents could not afford to take risks. Arnold and Christabel were approaching the formative period. Merely because his children were small, was a father justified in neglecting to contribute some portion of his time to the supervision of their highest needs? The

doctrine of mutual concessions was not novel. Oliver and she had recognized it as the corner-stone of modern wedlock when kneeling before the altar. If she was to limit her sphere because of marriage, it was only fair that he should be made to realize that he had violated the unwritten compact.

But before talking to him, she felt the desire to have a long talk with Barbara Ford. Their situations, dissimilar at the outset, for Barbara showed the evidences of genius from the start, had grown to resemble each other; indeed would be nearly identical save for the single difference that Oliver was not Hamilton. He never could be Hamilton—she thanked Heaven for that. At the same time was there any reason why he should not borrow an occasional leaf out of Hamilton's book? Mary felt the need of comparing notes; of thrashing out once more the whole problem of feminine subjection versus feminine opportunity by the light of an experience which had found a solution. She wished to be reassured that her resolve not to follow her preference and keep the same hours down-town as her husband was not a concession to moral cowardice.

Mary's decision to pause because of the children was reached after a struggle of forty-eight hours. Then she waited a week so as to be sure of her facts before conferring with Barbara. At the end of it the expected happened; a telegram arrived from Mrs. Walworth urging her to fix a date when she would visit Pittsburgh. The letter which followed confirmed Mrs. Palmer's prediction that her sister, who had ideas concerning landscape-gardening, was in search of a mentor of her own sex with whom she could co-operate: some one who would point out her errors and who was also capable of originating broadly, but not arbitrarily (like a man). She had (so the writer alleged) known too many instances

of well-considered plans utterly set at naught by the caprice of architects whose ambition seemed to be the production of something pleasing to themselves rather than to their clients. She hoped (in conclusion) that Mrs. Randall would fully understand that cost was not a factor; she fully expected and desired to make liberal expenditures to obtain the desired artistic effects.

Apart from striking a responsive chord, the attitude of the Jerrold sisters was illuminating because it confirmed Mary's growing belief that she had ceased to be a pioneer. There was evidently an abundance of women of the younger generation just like herself who saw the inequalities of the sex relation with her eyes, and who, though intent on rectifying them, were more than ever before in human experience solicitous to put their relations on such a plane that the race would be improved by the readjustment. Hitherto, though claiming neither for herself nor for Benham the credit of having set the ball in motion, Mary had felt herself to be one of a small but world-wide minority in advance of their time. While Benham's sensitiveness to currents of thought in the remotest corners of the globe was always to be taken for granted, she rejoiced to perceive that kindred spirits were springing up on every side. There was no longer doubt that the tiny seeds of the world-wide movement had sprouted with lightning rapidity; that the desire for readjustment had acquired a proselytizing impetus; and that Benham was already supplying a gratifying proportion of converts. Moreover so swift had been the progress of sentiment that clarification of her own ideas was one of the consequences. Views which to Barbara and herself in their prematrimonial confidences smacked of righteous audacity had suddenly become almost commonplaces of conduct.

As she approached the Fords' house, Mary came upon

a family party in the act of descending from the new automobile. She had arranged to arrive for luncheon. At this hour and for a while after Barbara laid her literary work aside and sought relaxation. Toward her friend's success Mary had always displayed a generous attitude. There was nothing depreciatory in her estimate of it. Barbara had been fortunate. Scarcely in her husband; at least Mary had not been in the habit of thinking so. But certainly in the opportunity granted her in the nick of time to make the most of a gift already tested. Her own case was entirely different; with the addition that, despite their kinship in tastes, Barbara and she had not many characteristics in common:

When Mary thought Barbara over—in view of all Barbara had accomplished it was inevitable that she should do so frequently—Barbara was really rather the reverse of a modern person. On the surface she was dreamy, placid, and unmethodical, with a far-away look in her eyes as became a genuine poet. Her verse had won its way to favor by its flowing rhythmic quality, and because for the most part it dealt with out-and-out heroes and villains of the old-fashioned picturesque order, such as pirate sea-dogs, highwaymen, and gentlemen adventurers. Her idyllic treatment of primitive passions was set off by stirring intervals of carnage. Those who knew the author were at loss to understand how one so gentle could possess such sanguinary facility. The action of her first play had hinged on the exploits of a Sir Galahad of a buccaneer of the Elizabethan period. Her novel "The Abandoned Farm," with a circulation already of over one hundred thousand copies, was in a somewhat different vein, including a modern setting. It was a mystery story of elemental Titan forces operating upon lowly folk—the socially submerged—which culminated in murder and general misery, but left the

artistic reader under the spell of Nemesis. For the reason that the progress of the tragedy was tempered by intimately sympathetic descriptions of scenery, more than one of her admirers had referred to her as the American Thomas Hardy—a comparison to which Mary took no exception. At the same time her loyal admiration was tinged with the regret that Barbara's intensity had never centred itself on more subtle natures and on contemporaneous themes illustrative of current social perplexities. Notwithstanding she had conquered obstacles and become a feminine celebrity, was she not open to the criticism of living virtually in a backwater so far as ability or disposition to help chart the channel of modern progress was concerned?

On the other hand, the stage version of Barbara's novel was drawing crowded houses—which more than explained the automobile, and Barbara, now convalescent from her fourth confinement was hard at work on a new story, the theme of which was still a secret. After all, however detached she might appear, Barbara was invariably affectionate and glad to see her. Moreover, she had already faced the problem of self-development versus the educational growth of the children and would surely have definite convictions on the subject which might be helpful.

"Congratulations to the wife of the coming leader of the bar!" So Ham hailed her as she drew near. "You haven't caught on to the great victory, I guess" he added, brandishing in her face a copy of a newspaper. "Ollie has won out in the suit against the Great Western Products Company. The court declares the new business doesn't violate its charter. So they need not shut up shop in that special line of goods, as the other side contended. There ought to be a good fat fee in that for Ollie."

"Let's hope so. I have a suspicion he is usually too moderate in his charges." With this Mary held out her arms to one of the twins in the machine in the custody of a nurse. "Come, pet. You don't know what it's all about, do you? Neither do I, dear. But it's splendid news nevertheless."

"Some one told me who was present when the case came on that he made a great argument. I started with the twins a little early to do some shopping before picking up the other children at school, and a newspaper boy landed me with this early edition by crying out 'War with Mexico,' though I knew it wasn't true. But my eye caught Ollie's name on the front page, so I stopped to read what he'd been up to."

"And this is your new car. It's a beauty; large enough for the entire family."

"Rather nifty, if I do say it. A Christmas present from Bab to me; bought with some of her easy money. With two plays and the novel coining money like a penny-in-the-slot machine, it would have been stingy not to choose the best on the market, seeing that I can't wear a tiara of diamonds and pearls."

"And now you've added the duties of chauffeur to your other housekeeping accomplishments?"

"Nay, lady, nay. I argued that out with Barbara; pointed out that, since we've changed places, it was logically her job to run the machine and bury her face in the mud whenever a tire bursts. She said she hadn't time and I answered: 'How about me on the ragged edge of nervous prostration from the daily round of household cares which never stop?' So we compromised on a chauffeur; he's coming day after to-morrow. With a wife who works, it would be undignified not to act rich. Besides, don't you think I look pale? The camel's back wouldn't stand another ounce." Thereupon Ham with

a hilarious wink shoved toward the door-steps the two older children who were hanging about his legs and reached back into the automobile to collect the results of his shopping.

"I'm glad you have at least the grace to acknowledge that housekeeping properly conducted makes some downtown work seem child's play."

In view of his rodomontade regarding Barbara and the care of the automobile, Mary was pleased to administer this sly dig, though she admired his administrative faculty. She was glad to observe that Ham was the picture of health; bubbling over, yet not offensively so, with prosperity. Evidently his life agreed with him. His apparel was that of a well-to-do man of leisure with harmless sporting proclivities, and he wore one of those glossy soft hats with the nap on which were just beginning to be fashionable. But though sleek in person and, as usual, cryptic to her thinking in his humor, he clearly had his wits about him and his youthful charges on his mind. As he turned back to face Mary, his arms full of bundles, he cast the glance of a field-marshal around him to make sure he had garnered everything and that the children were on the way to the house; then it centred interrogatively on the one of the twins she was cuddling, as if, forsooth, he suspected her, a mother, of holding the infant upside down. At the moment of stepping forward two thin books wedged under his arm slipped and fell to the sidewalk. If only to show how secure was her grasp of the darling, Mary stooped and picked them up. In doing so she read the titles.

"Why, Ham," she exclaimed. "You're just the person I'm anxious to talk to. I want to know how you and Barbara manage about the children when it comes to this sort of thing."

"Manage?" he echoed. "We're right up-to-date.

I bought those this morning because they're the very latest wrinkle on the subject."

"Yes, yes, I know. I've seen references to them; I've been meaning to get them." So interested was she that she suffered the nurse on the door-steps to reclaim the twin from her arms and began instinctively to run through the pages of one of the text-books.

"It's no cinch doing one's whole duty, for the constant temptation is to duck, and there's a pitfall either way. You mustn't tell them the religious fairy-tales we were brought up on because they'll have to unlearn them later. But if you avoid everything Baron Munchausen-like, and shovel in nothing but hard facts, you run the risk of starving their imaginations." Now that the necessity for vigilance was over, Ham's earnestness prompted him to halt in the middle of the sidewalk by way of emphasis. "We're getting on famously in some directions; not so well in others. Noah's ark is floating now on a sound scientific basis without serious mortality among the animals, and there's enough left of the Garden of Eden to illustrate the pains and penalties of disobedience and warn the infant mind against premature curiosity. We're just approaching Jonah, and that's why I've been rummaging at the bookstore with the hope of finding that some nature fakir has proved the picturesque occurrence to be credible after all."

Although her mind was bent on another phase of the inquiry, Mary was not averse to hearing the experience of one in a sense a rival. "We should be honest with them, though."

"Honest, but discreet; and primed to head them off. They're sharp as needles. Why shouldn't we be equally so?"

This was plausible, perhaps worth heeding. Her controlling impulse thus far in the care of her own children

had been to forestall subsequent disillusion. She would have liked to continue the subject, but he exclaimed: "I shall be late for luncheon if we don't stop talking, and I'm a martinet on punctuality. Please take these in while I run the car to the garage for the last time."

Mary opened her arms to receive the packages, but detained him. "Just a moment. What I really wished to know was this, is it you who teaches them, or does Barbara help?"

He cocked his head on one side suspiciously. "Why do you want to know?"

"Nothing disloyal to you, Ham, I'm merely curious."

"Well, our arrangement was that I should have full charge, except that as regards the children she was to be free to take a hand when she chose."

"And she does, doesn't she?"

"Once in a while. She means to and every now and then she has a spasm of poking into what is being done for them." He spoke meditatively, like one trying to present the best case possible. But he went on: "Seeing you're so intimate with the family and interested in the experiment, there isn't much use in trying to make out that it isn't up to me in the end every time to decide. She's too busy. When she isn't writing her mind is so occupied with dramatic situations that the children disturb her by their searching questions as to everything under the sun. So she has pretty nearly quit, except for a while after she has finished a book and hasn't started another. But you mustn't bother her about it, for she's liable to become hysterical if any one puts the kids into her mind." Ham started to go, but turned to add: "Though I think also she's beginning to realize the danger of too many cooks."

"It's very perplexing" Mary soliloquized. She was disappointed in Ham's reply, and had lost a little of her

zest in seeing Barbara, for apparently her friend had not much help to offer. But she was by no means prepared to accept the conclusion contained in Ham's final remark that a division of responsibility for the children was incompatible with the best results. If Barbara, the bread-winner, was too self-absorbed, it was not fair to Ham; and his having no better use for his time did not affect the proposition that what was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander; in no event should either husband or wife become merely a slave to the household or so engrossed in outside pursuits as to be disqualified from giving some active attention to the offspring. For the first time Mary was conscious of a shade of disapprobation regarding Barbara and of a feeling toward Ham that would have been compassion had he shown the slightest symptom of revolt.

But these emotions were tempered by the arrival of Barbara, who was very cordial, becomingly dressed, and free from preoccupation. She had heard of the Clifford Palmer engagement and her allusion to this at luncheon had the effect of counterbalancing Oliver's victory when exuberantly brought up again by her husband. Ham, visibly impressed, proceeded to record her progress on his fingers—"Prize fountain—apartment-houses—Italian garden—and now advisory landscape-architect. That's going some. I try to keep tabs on you, but you're hard to follow. You must look to your laurels, Bab. And what does Ollie think of it?"

She might have replied that she knew of something still more edifying; but this was for Barbara's private ear. For though restrained by Ham's inhibition from probing further as to the children, Mary was cherishing the inquiry which had brought her there—was her decision not to spread her wings to their full extent pusillanimous? As for Ham's pertinent question: "What

does Ollie think of it?" This could best be answered for the moment by an enigmatic smile. But one thing was certain, Oliver must be taught to regard her work at least as seriously as Ham regarded it.

Carried off to Barbara's sanctum for coffee and a chat, Mary revealed her Pittsburgh tidings, which produced the electrifying effect she had anticipated. Barbara embraced her with an ardor which plainly announced that in her opinion Mary had now arrived; that her light could no longer be hidden behind the modest disguise of an amateur. In reply Mary prefaced her dilemma by stating that it presented a far less exceptional instance of the progressive woman's perplexities than the listener's own. "Your gift, Barbara, was remarkable from the outset, you had given unmistakable proofs of it before you were called on to decide. I've worked up by degrees to the point I have reached."

"But in a year or two now, dear, you're sure to have a national reputation."

By means of stating her case in audible terms Mary suddenly found that she was beset by certainty and on the verge of tears. She saw that wonderful as Barbara was in her own way their situations were so far from parallel that to put the question she had contemplated would be merely to invite prolongation of a doubt which no longer existed and for the solving of which her friend lacked the requisite qualities. According to Ham—and he had done his best to shield her—Barbara was an example of domestic distortion, to be justified, if at all, on the ground of self-evident genius. But her own problem—that of millions of other women—was not to be solved by the mere inversion of sex egoism; and it was her duty to make this clear.

"I've burned my bridges. It's too late; I found out too late; I can never be in that way all I might have

been." Mary did not care if her words had a tragic sound. Was she not ringing her own death-knell? Voluntarily to be sure. Yet none the less sacrificially. "If I had known at first as you did, Oliver and I might have started on a different footing. As it is, we've gone too far to turn back, and I don't dare rely wholly on Sybil; under the circumstances it would be too great a risk. I should never be happy."

"But I supposed——"

"So she is. Ollie is delighted with Sybil; the children adore her; and housekeeping is the very thing she's fitted for so long as I keep my eye on her. But suppose I take it off altogether and anything were to happen, I could never forgive myself."

"You poor dear, it's pathetic." But the vivid sympathy on Barbara's face was tinged with alarm. "Surely you are not thinking of giving up."

"No indeed. You don't quite understand. Everything is to go on just as usual. I shall take advantage of my opportunities; accept all orders until I find I am neglecting my home. But this means necessarily that my professional career must be curtailed!" Mary paused for the tears welled up, evoked by the image of her children deteriorating from lack of parental care. "I've thought all this out, and it has been on my mind to tell you." She could not resist adding: "You can close your eyes and rely on your husband for everything. But I have no one with whom I can even share the great responsibility."

"Ah! but every one will make allowances for you and realize how much further you would have gone but for this" exclaimed Barbara, who, in spite of her literary qualities, had a conventionally ethical bent when it came to consolation.

Mary's expression of doleful fortitude was lit by an

ironic smile. "I fear that won't help me to work out all the wonderful things I've dreamed of. No, I shall be a professional by name, but I can never hope to be really more than a successful amateur." She looked up at her friend wistfully. "You can do this for me, though, Barbara, if you feel inclined. Some day when you have the opportunity, make Ollie see that I'm giving up a lot for the children's sake and his. He might believe it if you told him."

"Indeed I will. But Ollie is immensely proud of you. I'm positive that he thinks your work extraordinarily clever."

"Yes, just that—clever. And if I were to tell him tomorrow that I was going to cut loose from everything domestic and do nothing else whatever but design, wouldn't he regard me as demented? His first thought would be—she can't compete with trained men architects and is certain to be disappointed."

A flush mantled Barbara's placid countenance. "Perhaps," she said gently. "But you couldn't do that."

"Haven't I just told you that I couldn't, you dear, dreamy, impractical, successful thing?" Despite the atmosphere of a literary workshop which the secluded attractive room wore, and the numerous symbols of an alert imagination which it contained, Mary felt for a moment that she was dealing with a slow-witted child with whom, however deep one's need of being understood, it would never do to get angry. Yet she was talking to the most brilliant woman of her acquaintance in the line of individual accomplishment.

The flush lingered, but Barbara's soft eyes, wider and more limpid than their wont, fixed themselves fondly but unshrinkingly on Mary. "Don't think I fail to appreciate, dear, how terribly difficult and disappointing it is for you. And it has been so simple—such plain

sailing for me just because Ham happens to be Ham. Yes, I'm a fortunate exception; you put it very well. It never occurred to me that you could hope to cut loose entirely, since Oliver is Oliver. You are both of you such go-ahead persons; have so much initiative. I have taken for granted that you would do all you had time for away from home. With your splendid start and after what you have told me to-day, it can't be long before you're able to pick and choose and acquire a big reputation. I'm sure of it. But supposing I am wrong and because your hands are tied you are overshadowed, there's this about it, Mary—forgive me, dear, if I seemed dense, for we were at cross-purposes—the outcome will be so much more worth while in the big sense. Your doing and yet refraining is going to prove how much short of a full career there is left for the happily married woman of talent with a normal husband. It will help to revolutionize the old conception far more than any mere personal success where the path has been made easy." As she proceeded Barbara's expression had kindled and her steadfast gaze melted into the far-away look which it wore when she was rapt.

Though the ethical note of renunciation was still apparent, Mary listened with joy. It was a comfort to know that Barbara had not misunderstood entirely and was almost upright again on the pedestal where she belonged. Was she not her dearest friend—the only being of her own sex with whom she had ever been wont to share her aspirations and perplexities? Mary put out her arms impulsively, and drawing Barbara toward her whispered: "I'm so glad you see it just as I do. And the best part for me is," she continued, as with her hands on Barbara's shoulders she threw her head back that they might look soul to soul, "that I wasn't even tempted. Disappointed? Yes, what woman with my chances

wouldn't be? But I saw ahead; it would never do. With circumstances as they are, could I afford to risk the happiness of such a husband and such children?"

Mary's eyes were glistening, but she smiled seraphically. "You stated it so perfectly, Bab—a happily married woman of talent and a normal husband. That's our case. Ollie is just that—normal." Musing an instant she added: "I don't quite agree with you though that he has what I call initiative."

"You must know better than any one," replied Barbara gently. "I suppose my impression comes partly from Ham; he invariably refers to him as a 'corker.'"

"If I weren't Ollie's wife and didn't know him to be one of the best husbands in the world," flashed back Mary, "I might call that one of those vague masculine compliments which won't bear analysis."

CHAPTER XIII

MARY returned home congratulating herself on her foresight. A woman of less imagination might have drifted, until under an accumulation of flattering demands she had been swept off her feet to the peril of her domestic happiness. The result of forecasting the situation and facing it squarely before it threatened was a compromise, which all the more, because its equities were on her side, had dispelled every doubt and made the pathway of the future straight. Accurately speaking, the concession was wholly hers in that she had waived the question of what might have been and based her attitude on that which was. She felt all the happier for this; not merely care-free again, but a little exalted. A fresh crystallizing wind had clarified her horizon and blown all the mists away.

But having made the "great refusal" she was impatient of further obstacles. There must be no further beating about the bush; she must feel free to go and come as she chose. Sybil's palpitating announcement, which greeted her, that Oliver had won his lawsuit was the preface to incense-burning at dinner, which he deprecated at first but encouraged after he had finished his soup. It was an important victory from several points of view, so he admitted—prestige, pride of legal opinion, dollars and cents, and he made no secret of his satisfaction. Indeed he presently strode to the sideboard, drew the cork from a bottle which stood there and set it on the table. "Who's fetching three wine-glasses?" he demanded gayly.

The bottle contained nothing more alcoholic than claret to be sure. But the proceeding was very unusual. Mary considered him as virtually weaned from exciting beverages. What was more thirst-satisfying than cool water, unless possibly grape-juice or a soda lemonade in the heat of summer? She reasoned that there was a vestige of the barbaric left in the most refined men; they still took their pleasure queerly. "If I had realized, I would have provided ice-cream or something else you like," she remarked.

As a matter of fact, Oliver was but moderately fond of ice-cream; he thought of it as a woman's dish. But this was neither here nor there. His immediate concern was to fill the glasses which Sybil had brought from the china-closet. This he did ceremoniously, handing one of them to his wife across the table. "Break loose for once, mother, and drink that down. It will do you good. It's not every day in the week that I win such an important case for such an important client."

Mary hesitated. She had taken a sip of claret occasionally, and she disliked the taste. But her husband's insinuation of a deficiency of animal spirits rankled. She prided herself on her habitual liveliness, and the thought of even seeming a spoil-sport was abhorrent. Oliver's relapse was not to her liking, but his habits were too exemplary to justify demur, and he was obviously disposed to make a point of her compliance.

"Very well, dear," she replied, and she waved her glass before drinking to show how well she could rise to the occasion. "I'm delighted and proud you won and that the success is likely to be profitable. Ham Ford was very much impressed. Barbara says his favorite phrase for you is a 'corker.'"

"Ham's a gas-bag. Well, here's how." He drank off half of the contents of his glass. "That's not bad," he

remarked critically. "It should have been champagne, but there's none in the house. The George Pattersons polished off the last bottle."

Mary bridled slightly. "I remember well. You know you can't afford it and that you haven't missed it, Ollie." She had swallowed several mouthfuls of her dose without making a wry face though it accorded with her conception of the taste of ink.

"Perhaps. But I'm not kicking at this; it goes to the right spot." He drained the glass then turned to Sybil with a wink and exhibited the label of the bottle. "A California wine. She put me up to it. 'For though on pleasure she was bent, she had a frugal mind.'"

What had come over Ollie? Mary said to herself that his pleasantries were not merely on the verge of silliness but insubordinate in a connubial sense because of their tendency to produce a false impression. She hastened to correct this by addressing Sybil, who with the air of one enjoying something delicious had been demurely sipping her claret until it was nearly gone.

"I suppose you realize that he is simply trying to tease me?"

"Perfectly; and I'm on your side, Mary. The California wine is very good; I never tasted any before. It's patriotic, too, to use it. Doing so might help him in politics if it were known."

Oliver struck his fist on the arm of his chair. "I call you to witness if she isn't a daisy. She keeps her ear to the ground, I believe, every hour of the twenty-four and has Everett Dean beaten out of sight already, to say nothing of your humble servant."

"Yes, dear; she'll be getting a political bee herself if you don't look out." Mary smiled indulgently at their horse-play. "As to intoxicants, Oliver knows my views; but I have never suggested his banishing wine

from the house—and it is for him of course to decide whether he wouldn't be better off without stimulants. I happen to believe—as many progressive people do—that the time is not so very far off when nobody who counts will use them. But I've never badgered him unduly. Isn't it true, Ollie?"

"It's the gospel truth," he answered, and by way of confirmation he refilled his glass.

"You have been very sensible, Mary," said Sybil, "and Ollie, as every one knows, is next thing to a total abstainer. But I've heard it said that, apart from society people who always have wine of some kind on the table, whether they drink it or not, the American man keeps temperance hall to please his wife, but drinks in odd places away from home when her eye isn't on him." She spoke in a pussy-cat tone which deprecated preciser knowledge. "In the wine-producing countries both men and women drink a little, but not many very much. That explains my not disliking this," she continued, taking another sip, "in fact it tastes very nice. I was given a cocktail once, but—er—it was very strong." Then turning to Oliver she added: "Perhaps what they told me isn't true. Is it that I'm mistaken?"

"About the habits of our fellow countrymen?" Smiling, he looked at her quizzically. "I'm afraid somebody has been giving away secrets and that you know too much already. Seeing that you let me out, I guess it's safe to say that they take a sip or two occasionally when their wives are not around."

"It's notorious that they do, and far too many," interposed Mary. "Personally I think it's deteriorating."

The topic was disagreeable. Remembering Sybil's past, it was easy to surmise who was responsible for the cocktail; and the pertinency of her remarks, which seemed to have proceeded from a clear sky, was not

clear. They simply afforded Oliver further excuse for making light of performances of which he really disapproved. Why was he so obstreperous to-night? It was difficult to understand the satisfaction of belying one's own character. Mary felt that the moment was ripe for an abrupt change of subject and she discharged her bomb.

"It may interest both of you to hear that I am going to Pittsburgh in a few days."

She enjoyed their astonishment, but forestalled inquiries by briefly giving the particulars, seeking at the same time to dispel the impression that what she contemplated was anything unusual. She modestly stated that nothing might come of it; on the other hand, did it seem likely that Mrs. Walworth would have sent for her unless she had made up her mind? She ended by saying: "The probabilities are that I shall be frequently, after this, several days at a time on the road."

"Well, I'll be jiggered," said Oliver slowly. "How can you manage that?" He appeared bewildered rather than annoyed, as if he were asking himself what she would do next.

Mary met the challenge promptly. "You would think nothing of such an absence; why should I?"

"Travel to and fro by yourself?"

But for the apprehensive note, which touched her in spite of all, this would have sounded puerile. "Yes, just like a drummer. No one will molest me, and no one will think it queer, for if you should inquire, Ollie, you would find that there are scores of women in this country doing just that already."

Mary felt no need of support; the strength of her position struck her as self-evident. But she was pleased nevertheless to hear Sybil exclaim with an excess of enthusiasm: "Of course you can't throw over such a

splendid opportunity to show what you can do. Excuse my saying so to your face, but you've certainly made wonderful progress lately. If I were Ollie, I should be proud as a peacock."

"I am, I am. Didn't I know when I married her that she was the cleverest girl in Benham?"

"Thanks, dearest. But I'm a very different person from the woman you married." Mary spoke quietly. It was sufficient for the moment; would set him thinking perhaps and prepare him for what she meant to tell him later.

She had it "out" with Oliver that night after they had gone up-stairs. She endeavored to speak lovingly and unaggressively, but with so much candor that he could not fail to understand. Approaching him with straight brows, she put her arms around his neck, then pushed the curly locks from his forehead.

"I adore you, Oliver," she said. "But I'm going to stick a pin into you. Just a little one, only it's tolerably sharp. I don't think you realize at all how far I've gone professionally." She paused an instant to let her words sink in. "You're accustomed to think of me as an amateur—a clever amateur. I'm a long way past that. I'm a professional now, and have done—notable work. You heard what Sybil said. Ask any architect of your acquaintance and he will admit familiarity with the name of Mary Arnold. And I'm in the way too of making good money as you call it."

She paused, quailing a little under her task. It was more embarrassing than she had expected, telling her husband to his face that he had underestimated her talent; such a solid-looking husband too, with such an amiable yet astonished smile. Notwithstanding her zeal and her own height, she seemed somehow to dwindle. Or was the smile inscrutable? She could not feel sure

what he was thinking. "It was natural enough," she resumed, "because you were so absorbed in your work and other things. I'm telling you this—I doubt if I would otherwise, you wool-gatherer—because I want to make sure you don't imagine, in case I take journeys in future rather frequently, that everything won't go on just as smoothly and you be just as comfortable and we be just as loverlike as hitherto. That I should be called away from home was one of the possibilities I had in mind when I engaged Sybil. But because it happens that I've received more recognition than I dared hope, there isn't the slightest danger you will suffer. If there were—if there should ever prove to be—I would give the whole thing up, much as it means to me. Aren't we all at the present time perfectly comfortable and happy and are not you and I closer to each other than ever before?" She paused confidently to give him an opportunity to deny this if he could. "And, for the reason that it does mean so much to me, I want you on your side to agree not to hamper me and to try to regard my work as seriously as other people are ready to." Observing him wince, she qualified her charge by adding: "You never make fun of me; I don't mean that. Indeed you have always professed to be very proud of the results of my work. But you do give me the impression of regarding it merely as a pretty accomplishment that happens to be amusingly lucrative."

Mary felt that she had covered the ground. There was no loophole left for misunderstanding, and she had not said too much. Oliver was visibly disconcerted; the color rose to his cheeks; he looked contrite and a little shamefaced. Yet he was struggling still to smile. As for herself, her voice at the close had been tremulous; she was conscious of feeling a little weak. The pressure of Oliver's strong arms was grateful to her as he uttered

the disclaimer: "I didn't really think so." ("Yes you did," she said to herself, "but let it pass.") "I'm immensely proud of the prizes you've won and the recognition you've received. But I've evidently been stupid in my expression of this. I will turn over a new leaf."

This was better. Mary looked up into his face beatifically. "If you do there won't be a happier woman in the wide world."

"And how long are these expeditions to last?"

This was so startling, in view of his previous words, that she studied his face again. She could see that perplexity was wrestling with penitence. The venerable tradition died hard.

"For the remainder of our lives, I hope," she said with gentle explicitness.

"And to what will they lead next?"

"To nothing further whatever so far as you and I—our domestic relations are concerned. That's just the point. Some women would tell you a different story. Or rather they would have said nothing, and just gone ahead. Don't you see? Ah, can't you trust me, Ollie?"

"Trust you? To the ends of the earth." Still nestling in his arms, Mary was comforted by his confirming embrace. "We agreed long ago," he went on, "that all wives should be given a fairer show, and I thought I was in the front rank of aiding and abetting husbands. But somehow I seem to have fallen behind the procession. When you spoke of trotting about the country, I found myself conjuring up objections—old-timers I guess. Well, why shouldn't you, if you wish to? Oh yes, I've nothing to complain of at home, and you tell me there are no cards left up your sleeve. Go ahead; I shan't hamper you; it's all right." With a nervous laugh he freed himself mechanically and rising towered above her, a subjugated but still nonplussed

giant, his hands in his pockets. He had the air of one showing the door to a familiar friend who had betrayed him. "I suppose," he said meditatively but with conviction, "that it's a brand-new conception of the marriage relation, not any mere mending of fences that we husbands must get used to. And you tell me, besides, that I shall never notice the difference?"

"You won't, Ollie. But you're right; and isn't nearly everything on earth which is stimulating new?"

Mary was pleased with her sententiousness. It would serve as a sign-post to keep before Oliver the truth which he had just enunciated, and also as a halo to her own self-justification. He was slow in welcoming changes, but it was typical of him when convinced to prefer the new path to the old rut. It was not necessary to dwell on the merits of her compromise; even in his present frame of mind he might not be able to concede it. But she felt that she could dismiss from this moment all concern on the score of his conjugal oversolicitude and give herself up unreservedly to making the most of the limits to which circumstances confined her.

Mary's visit to Pittsburgh proved more than satisfactory. She found Mrs. Walworth to be the counterpart of her twin sister, embellished by the advantages which spring from large possessions and a definite hobby. The Clifford Palmers were in the latter-day sense comfortably rich; Gregory Walworth had money to burn as the result of large ownership in rarely idle and ever expanding manufacturing industries—money which his wife spent lavishly, but with conscientious intent. The ability to accumulate wealth might not be characteristic of the Jerrolds, but they considered that they had a patent on wise expenditure.

Mary's visit took place during a hiatus in Mrs. Walworth's acute activities. She was in the moulting stage

so to speak. The feathers of her last hobby were dropping off and those of the next were merely sprouting. But for her husband's occupation she would, in spite of her opulent bent, have championed the popular industrial under dog, then the vogue. Some relic of respect for the masculine frown prevented this and she had chafed under the restriction. It has been already stated that Carrie Walworth's sympathies were on the side of the eternal feminine. Indeed she might be described as having been born with a chip on her shoulder where any comparison between the sexes was in issue. The hobby from which the feathers were dropping off had been the child widows of India. When the impulse was fresh she had organized a league and defrayed two-thirds the cost of deluging the public with literature in the endeavor to proselytize it in their behalf. But so rapidly does the world move, that latterly even the echoes of the movement had died away; and her individual enthusiasm had been dampened by the assurances of an erudite visiting Hindoo, whom she entertained, that the child widows of India were rapidly approximating the status of the snakes in Ireland.

But however rapidly the world moved, it had always to reckon with the Jerrold sisters. Intellectually speaking, they were early risers and recognized the approach of new ideas even though unheralded. Omnivorous devourers of current literature and scavengers of the magazines of two continents, patronesses of every lecturer with much or nothing to say, tenacious of telling phrases which by repetition could become watchwords, and with telepathic ears trained to detect the faintest sign of popular awakening, they prided themselves—and rightfully—on being ahead of their time. About a month ahead. Reasoning superficially, this might appear inconsiderable. But it was ample for them. It gave

time to communicate with each other and to prepare themselves to appear on the crest of the impending wave. If Carrie "caught on" first she wrote without delay to Deborah and vice versa. Their custom was to operate in pairs—partly from affection and partly from shrewd experience that fires lighted simultaneously in separate spots more readily become a conflagration. It was pleasant also to feel that by playing into each other's hands their respective communities got the benefit of Jerrold leadership and lost no time in assimilating the latest social gospel.

Mrs. Walworth's hobby was a new phase of the eternal feminine; how wide and omnipresent and conspicuous a phase she had at the moment only an inkling. She was brooding over sundry new ideas each distinct from the others, yet to a receptive mind all interdependent, which had recently become a part of her inner consciousness. The statements of a recent lecturer that this is a man-constructed world, and that hitherto since time first was all its standards, all its precepts, and all its obligations, including those prescribed for woman, have been of masculine origin, had riveted her attention and later stirred her ire. She had never thought of this distinction in terms before; it threw light on innumerable problems, yet offered a harbinger of hope. What had been need not and must not last indefinitely. Then, again, she had been fascinated by her excursions into what the social scientists termed "eugenics." She had been obliged to look the word up in the dictionary four times before she could remember precisely what it meant; somehow she forgot. But she was sure now; and while deploring the obstacles which interfered with the propagation of the human race on such correct principles as prize animals or vegetables, she recalled with satisfaction that there were no tuberculous or feeble-minded

instances in the Jerrold genealogy. And last but not least she was pondering the stimulating suggestion that woman, the domestic housekeeper, should become the civic housekeeper; consecrate herself by systematic co-operation to the abolition of fly-blown markets and eye-offending back yards.

These preliminaries to a subsequently aggressive and panoplied state of mind are referred to because at the moment when Mrs. Walworth sent for Mary she was engaged in a crusade which bid fair to keep her busy for the remainder of her days, and certainly beyond the stretch of her visitor's career. Several years were to elapse before the Jerrold sisters became presidents of their respective local Equal Purity Leagues, and subjects hitherto tabooed from polite conversation were trenchantly discussed at all social gatherings. But the pregnant future was only such a short distance ahead that, as one whose mission it was to be a preceptress rather than an exponent, Mrs. Walworth felt her heart expand with approbation of this engaging young matron who had already illustrated so signally by personal example the benefits of not following the servilely beaten track. In Mary Arnold—who, wearing her husband's name in private and domestic circles, had yet achieved an individual triumph by her own, a devoted, vigilant, but well-poised wife and mother, with personal charms the claims of which were never neglected—was not the desirable modern woman of the future prefigured? Nay, not of the future, but the present, for she was on the spot and in the midst of her problem. She stood beckoning as it were to Mrs. Walworth's incubating mood, with the result that the Pittsburgh enlightener took her to her arms, marvelling that one with so few advantages in the way of artistic training had been able to accomplish so much. It could not be other than a case of extraordi-

nary talent which would not down; and as such it offered her as a Mæcenas an opportunity to show her loyalty to the eternal feminine and vindicate her choice at the same time. For it would not have been in keeping with the Jerrold conception of wise expenditure to be swept off her feet by a mere whim. It was one thing to cry, "Let the men architects look to their laurels," another to exercise sagacious foresight before one spoke. Was not their lack of level-headedness the charge which the stereotyped jeering man was perpetually bringing up against women?

But the influence of the visit was far from one-sided. This is the story of Mary Randall (or Arnold if you prefer) and not of the Jerrold sisters. But if her experiences at Pittsburgh seem to have been overshadowed by a disposition (on the part of the chronicler) to dwell on Carrie Walworth, it was only for the purpose of indicating the atmosphere in which Mary found herself—an atmosphere which in another fortnight would be that of Benham. Mary returned home elated; but not solely because she had been commissioned to design the Walworth country-place, and been taken seriously by a community with the means to perpetuate whatever it fancied. She was carrying home with her as the result of her association with her hostess an amplified philosophy regarding feminine initiative and opportunity, which made her feel that, though in the van, she had ceased to be peculiar, but was only one of a large procession of federated contemporaries. If she ever had been a pioneer, the world had caught up with her, and in doing so had almost deprived her contribution of any claim to originality. She was but a highly evolved normal woman in the modern sense, whose concern should be not that she was too precocious, but lest she be overtaken and passed.

The direct effect of this was to concentrate her attention still more closely on her work and to dispel the last vestige of solicitude lest she become too deeply involved in it. Her loftier point of view enabled her to detect almost immediately on the Benham horizon numerous signs of a new dispensation to which she was privy and in which she intended to be active. Her days were so full that they sped—became weeks, then months, with startling rapidity. She kept constantly to her programme; went and returned as her professional employment demanded. Her eye still supervised the household affairs, but they were carried on by proxy to the extent that she had predetermined. And everything continued to run smoothly. There was nothing remiss in her factotum's administration; no evidences of dissatisfaction on Oliver's part. The children continued to love Sybil; and Mary herself at least once a week supplemented their instruction so as to make sure they were learning the right things in the right way.

CHAPTER XIV

It was just a year and a half subsequent to Mary's first visit to Mrs. Walworth that the Benham Housekeepers Sanitary League was founded. If, as one of the charter members looking back, Mary had pleaded that the vista leading to this goal had dwarfed or even shut out all other public happenings, she would merely have been in the category with millions of men before her so blinded by and absorbed in a pet project as to be indifferent to the existence of the sun, moon, and stars, not to speak of other terrestrial doings. But though she did not minimize to herself the importance of the new organization, she had not intended to miss anything of national or local importance. She prided herself that whatever had happened had gone in at one ear even though it went out (because to her thinking trivial) at the other. Concerning what had happened politically she knew in general (all that was essential at all events), and precisely so far as it bore on Oliver.

He had resisted the perennial temptation to be sent to the legislature, which had been dangled perpetually before his eyes, and he was sticking close to his business in which he appeared to be very much absorbed. He had two junior partners now—the firm was Randall, Wellington & Moore. He had won a number of other large cases since that of the Great Western Products Company; lost several also, but seemed to be steadily forging to the front so well as she could judge. Their total income was steadily increasing. Oliver had urged that she should invest her commissions, but she de-

murred, saying gently: "You've been very good. But of course my earnings must go into the common purse, not be set apart. Otherwise you would give the effect of not taking them seriously; and really they amount to a lot."

He had yielded. They had succeeded in saving something appreciable, and had agreed that it was to be credited to them proportionately. At the same time they could afford to spend with greater freedom. Their social sphere had widened owing to the new acquaintances Mary had made. Guests whom they met at the Clifford Palmers' invited them to dinner and presently it became their own turn to entertain. Without aspiring to social prominence, it was necessary to recognize that they had acquired a position of their own and must live up to it. The almost invariable formula which accompanied their introduction was: "You may not realize who Mrs. Randall is; the Mary Arnold—her maiden name—whose landscape-gardening we all admire so much." Not infrequently the men next to whom she sat at some dinner made complimentary allusions to Oliver also, spoke of his standing at the bar or his political prominence. It was pleasant to feel that he and she were keeping pace together and without being rivals were in the true sense of the word a rising couple. When it came to the entertainments at home, it had seemed to Mary wise to branch out a little, but without sacrifice of principle. While letting down the bars to the extent of serving a less frugal repast for her guests than her everyday fare, she still endeavored to avoid catering to gluttony or wasting her substance in highly seasoned viands. She sought to give her little dinners an atmosphere of their own. What she supplied was appetizing of its kind. If those whom she invited left the table unduly hungry, it was their own fault. "To feed were best at

home," a saying as old as Shakespeare; but to secure adequate time for enlivening conversation she made a point of interspersing among the few solid dishes various varieties of delicatessen and a sweetish salad of crushed nuts, lettuce, and fruit. She was well content with the general effect produced by her dinners upon her guests. The only important concession to the demands of mere luxury came when Oliver demurred to dispensing with wine. She gave way; she was no martinet. Besides, she was too happy to insist. Mary felt that her general ideas on the subject of entertaining were lucidly expressed when she said to her husband:

"From the modern housekeeper's point of view we're in a transition period. I'm marking time as it were; trying to conform to my standards of proper living and at the same time not disgrace you socially, dearest. But the world is moving. Have you noticed the vast number of apartment-houses with kitchenettes springing up like mushrooms everywhere? They're for the people who've taken to light housekeeping, partly because of the worries of the servant question and partly to avoid the burden of a big fire. The day isn't very far off when any one who wishes to entertain elaborately or to gorge will have to do so in a restaurant; or the sybarite in his club so long as the club lasts. There won't be any other place left. The people in general—the big families for whom a kitchenette will not answer—will be supplied from neighborhood kitchens, where the food which cannot be canned will be cooked in bulk and transported by mechanical devices to the dwelling or flat. The reign of the individual kitchen plant is nearly over and only the few women who are cooks by choice and training will be obliged to ruin their complexions by peering into a red-hot oven."

The bringing together during the winter of Sybil and

Henry Thornton had been brought to pass. It had been easy to arrange that she and Oliver should accompany her to "Foxgrove" for a week-end visit. Apart from the project of exhibiting Sybil, it would open the eyes of her husband and her friend to what was taking place under their noses. She was sure that neither of them was fully alive to Benham's social development. But she was pleased to find that Sybil adapted herself quickly to the luxuries of Henry Thornton's establishment and appeared to advantage among them. It was obvious that her artless enthusiasm at what she beheld produced an agreeable impression on Henry, who was her escort.

"How adorable! Why it takes me straight back to beloved Italy. I can't bear to think I'm going away to-morrow." Comments such as these had marked her progress from one feature of the estate to another, and several times she clapped her hands in undisguised ecstasy. No wonder that their host, though inured to compliments, was gratified and beguiled by the spontaneous delight of one who recognized so unmistakably the atmosphere he had sought to reproduce. And it had pleased Mary that the most outspoken tribute of all was reserved for her pergola. It was finished now; the vines were beginning to clamber, and the mediæval seats were in place. Sybil had stopped short at the entrance entranced. "Don't speak to me—any one," she said; then after a brief exalted survey she turned to exclaim: "And these are yours, dear?" In another moment, selecting one of the benches—that which Mary preferred to all the others—she dropped upon it and in joyous appreciation of the view chanted: "Now I'm really there. It's perfect. And don't tell me that's the Mediterranean."

The flattery was pardonable, for the weather happened

to be exquisite; the landscape wore the softness and the wide expanse of lake the shimmer of a southern clime. At the first opportunity Henry had whispered in her ear: "Why is it that you've kept your little friend hidden until now?" This was propitious certainly as a beginning. But, pleased as she was that her protégée had made a favorable impression, the thought suddenly occurred to Mary—"if he does steal Sybil away, how shall I be able to manage without her?" Though her magnanimity would never allow her to stand in Sybil's way and would prompt her in the end to make the match if she could, the case was one which would justify procrastination. Having afforded Thornton a glimpse of her little friend, she would leave him to seek Sybil out, especially as this might well prove a more effective method of kindling the divine fire than throwing her at his head. It had proved a gala-day. The guests had been told to make the pergola their rendezvous and luncheon was served there.

As has been said, Mary's progress did not exclude knowledge of current events. It had been her wont hitherto to keep in touch with them by reading a weekly magazine; but latterly she had made a practice of dropping in at a timely topic class, to which Mrs. Clifford Palmer and the other prominent women subscribed, where a Mrs. Cora Phinney delivered to a roomful of people at regular intervals a clear and comprehensive summary of world and national politics. This was a considerable time-saver. One learned what was going on everywhere without being obliged to wade through columns of print. Familiarity with public affairs was thus retained so long as they were uppermost in the talk of people, and on the front pages of the newspapers. But in Mary's case certain facts stood out because of their association with her husband. Ex-

Governor Guy Bonner had been nominated again and been defeated for a second time though by a reduced majority. Oliver had taken the stump, but the issues of the canvass had struck her as exceptionally dull. The bone of contention between the orators had suddenly become biennial versus annual State elections. Oliver's party advocated the former as progressive legislation. Mrs. Cora Phinney, though not apt to take sides in her lectures, was inclined to agree with him. But manifestly it was not a burning question whether the legislature met every year or every other year, and Mary had felt a little irritated by Oliver's ardor. He had taken part earlier and spoken more frequently than before, though it seemed as if he might have managed to avoid the thick of the contest.

He had spoken once in Benham, but unluckily it was during one of her absences. Sybil had gone to hear him. Henry Thornton had persuaded her that it was a necessary part of her political education to hear Oliver speak. Henry Thornton was not the easiest man to fathom, now that he was older. The ability to pick and choose had made him wary. But though his sidelong glances at Sybil might be followed by a reaction which caused him to look straight ahead, there was no mistaking his occasional interest. But for Mary to part with Sybil at this juncture would be exceedingly inconvenient. Procrastination would suit her plans much better. There was no falling off in the professional demands upon her. Not a rush of orders, but a constant influx of new work to take the place of that completed. Besides the art student, Miss Myrick, she now employed two other assistants of the same type. They occupied a suite of three rooms in the neighboring apartment-house. The sign on the door read: "Mary Arnold, Architect and Landscape-Gardener." She had been

obliged to come to this. But she was keeping rigorously to her predetermination as to the limits of her work, and the extent of her home responsibility. She dropped in frequently to supervise their labors, but she did much of her own work at home, so as not to lose touch with the children. The Clifford Palmer order was now off her hands and an army of workmen was busy carrying out her landscape-gardening scheme for the Walworths. But the example set by these ladies had been followed. She had several new clients in each of the two cities, and the reproductions of her pergola in the illustrated newspapers had incited the authorities of another municipality to ask her to design an allegorical statue for a public park. Her business and repute were growing and she believed she had found the happy mean between sheer domesticity and individualism.

Sybil was eager to describe Oliver's eloquent speech, and its effects on the crowd of listeners. "You missed it, Mary," she said. "Ollie spoke wonderfully. You ought to have heard them applaud and yell—like maniacs. The hall was crowded to the doors and thick with smoke. I nearly stifled, but I was proud to be there."

It seemed to Mary only the other day that she had listened to this glowing encomium from Sybil concerning the rally in Benham which she had been prevented from attending. Yet since then a second year had passed, and the politicians were at it hammer and tongs once more. Guy Bonner was again the candidate. He had expressed reluctance at first, urging that the party would be more apt to prevail under a new leader. Mary's own unuttered comment when his name was mentioned had been "What! That old war-horse?" But his scruples had been overcome and Oliver was the person

said to be responsible for his conversion. Having remonstrated with him, Oliver had agreed as one of the conditions of the ex-governor's compliance to take a very active part in the campaign. Biennial elections, though still a leading issue, had been supplemented by a fresh cause, a combined Employers' Liability and Workingmen's Compensation Act. This particular bill was the result of hard work by the minority party since the adjournment of the legislature. Their adversaries, so it was charged, had coquetted with the subject, though in control of both branches for two years. As far as Mary could make out, here was another instance where both parties were in favor of the legislation demanded, but one had managed by manœuvring to outflank the other and thereby to claim exclusive sincerity.

At the convention Oliver was the chairman of the Committee on Resolutions, a relatively important position—Mary realized this—for it made him the party spokesman of the occasion, and she deplored her inability to be present. For a second time fate stood in the way. The date clashed hopelessly with a sudden call to Pittsburgh, due to a strike among the workmen employed on the Walworth plans. The contractor was in a "hole," and must either be extricated or settled with. Mrs. Walworth had telegraphed that Mary's coming was imperative. But for the conflict of dates, Mary would have drafted Oliver to straighten out the legal complications. It was surely appropriate that each should bring business to the other. But to remain at home was out of the question, however regrettable.

According to Sybil, from whom she promptly heard all about it, there never was such a convention as regards either enthusiasm or eloquence, and Oliver had towered above his fellows. The applause accorded him when he rose to make his report had been tumultuous, exceeding

even that bestowed on the head of the ticket. And his speech had been the feature of the day—so clear, so forcible, so level-headed; above all, so charged with the conviction that his party was in the right and must win. No wonder the delegates went wild and cheered him again and again. It was obvious, Mary reasoned, that he must have acquitted himself creditably. Sybil's panegyric renewed her regrets that she had not been there; at the same time, she could not help feeling a little amused. She had never attended a political convention; but the presumption was warranted that nearly everything transacted under such auspices was cut and dried. It had been Oliver's part to announce the platform and expatiate diplomatically on the issues. But was it not fair to assume that Sybil had magnified both the importance of the occasion and of the part played by him? Mary though edified felt impelled to remark: "It must have been a stirring scene, and Oliver evidently did well what was expected of him, but he wouldn't thank you in the end for making too much of it."

Sybil had dropped her eyes humbly like one confronted with superior wisdom; then raised them again to assert: "He wouldn't listen to me now if I did. He's so absorbed in the contest it is difficult even to make him eat enough. But everybody has been talking about his speech."

"I've no doubt of that. We all agree Ollie speaks finely. But you couldn't have used stronger language to describe a famous orator. It was loyal of you, but to any one excepting me it might sound—er—a little foolish."

"But then most people know I am foolish, Mary, and would make allowances." This uttered in her soft, deprecating voice was disarming, even though coupled with what followed: "And I'm foolish enough to be-

lieve that Ollie will be a famous orator some day if he isn't already."

The simplicity of this did not seem to require rebuttal at the moment, but Mary had occasion shortly after to recall the estimate. She had taken the first opportunity to congratulate her husband: "I hear you covered yourself with glory and prophesied success in a very effective speech. I am terribly disappointed I didn't hear you." What wife could say more than this? His laconic reply had been: "We have them on the run. We shall win this time without fail." She was struck by his eager preoccupation; he seemed almost austere in his tensity. For a moment it occurred to her that he was offended by her absence, but his demeanor speedily disabused her of this. Sybil was correct; he was simply so possessed by the importance of the contest, and by his determination to prevail that everything else was for the moment subordinated to it. While business continued to draw her hither and thither, the State was in a ferment. There was the customary flood of oratory and exchange of recriminations. Though too busy to follow the details, she realized that Oliver was much in the public eye. His speeches were reported at length and from time to time she came upon his picture in the newspapers; an excellent likeness (journalistic art was becoming less painfully libellous), the image of his manly, sensible, good-humored self. She skimmed through what he said. For the most part she could guess the substance in advance; but it was very lucid and to the point—admirably suited to miscellaneous crowds.

Mary feared that the election would pass before she had a chance to hear him. Returning during the last fortnight of the campaign when public masculine frenzy was at its height, from an out-of-town business errand which had consumed only the forenoon, she decided, as

the day was beautiful, to leave the train at one of the suburban stations and proceed on foot. This enabled her to follow the winding river Nye at a point where the surroundings were still almost rustic and yet would require her to make a cross-cut through the busiest thoroughfares of the city in order to reach home—an itinerary which as an index to local progress was the best kind of moving-picture show. She did this every now and then; it had been a favorite tramp in the early days of their married life; but many months had elapsed since her last excursion. Mary marvelled as she walked at the numerous neighborhood innovations; within the confines of almost every block there were startling changes; huge, towering buildings had replaced insignificant tenements, and sections which yesterday seemed secluded had become centres of traffic and noise.

Struck by the transformation of a square through which two streets running at right angles had been continued so as to intersect, and pausing to observe the changes, she realized that a portion of the turmoil was accidental. At the side farthest from her a throng was collecting, and as she gazed thither loud cheering drowned all other sounds. It dawned on her instantly that the cause must be political, and following in the wake of those gathering from all quarters until she found herself on the outskirts of a surging, exuberant concourse of people, she realized that the man who rose to speak just as she arrived was her husband. Using the automobile in which he was riding as a platform, he stood head and shoulders above the crowd which, noisy in its demonstration until this moment, grew quiet as he raised his hand.

Mary's heart quickened pleasurably. No combination of circumstances could have suited her better than this—to be able to listen when he was unaware of her,

to look on without being seen. Oliver's athletic, stalwart figure lost nothing by the prominence; his hat was off, his hair slightly tossed, and he seemed for a moment to rely for domination on his good-humored smile, which proved so infectious that, in spite of the gesture, some enthusiast threw up his hat and demanded three more cheers for Oliver Randall. He delivered his opening words with the air of an easy-going confederate primed with sallies: "I thank you, boys, and I'm glad to know you're with us in this fight." He told a story that appealed to the risibilities of the crowd, which laughed exuberantly, and Mary knit her brows. Oliver laughed with them in relish of the humor; then, as they subsided to allow him to proceed, his demeanor changed; the smile faded, his visage sobered as he said: "It's to those who don't agree with us that I'm speaking. I'm going to make clear to them why they should."

So much of himself did he throw into this preface that a hush fell upon the throng. From this instant he became impassioned. Without seeming to raise his voice, but in a tone vibrant with conviction, he made every word audible to those farthest away, as he set forth succinctly and in simple phraseology the merits of the bill for which he stood sponsor. It was framed, so he declared, in aid of social justice and to bring order out of chaos. It aimed to relieve the community—the workman from the worst menace of hazardous occupations, both him and the employer from the dire uncertainties of dilatory trials, and the overtaxed public from the most serious expense of industrial warfare. Zeal shone from his face as he hammered in his points, which changed to the fire of deep-seated indignation as he turned the vials of scorn upon his opponents. "And what have they done for two years except talk? The bill which they professed to be ready to father, but

pigeonholed, would have driven the State into bankruptcy and retarded the cause of social justice for fifty years." Allowing the exultant shout which greeted this declaration to spend itself, he became once more the man of affairs who would disclaim the animus of the fanatic by saying: "Come, let us reason together." He appealed to them in a few ringing words to weigh the evidence and to consider which party had been truest to its pledges and was most sincere in its desire for constructive legislation. He left no room for doubt that the impassioned note with which he closed was the genuine outlet of intense belief.

Mary's first thought was that Oliver had improved greatly in his delivery. Then, as she listened, interest and curiosity were merged in wondering admiration. She tingled with a mixture of emotion, pride, and bewilderment. How happened it that he had become such a forceful, magnetic speaker without her knowledge? She knew his arguments by heart—at least she thought she did; but somehow, though she was loath to discard the opinion that he was making a mountain out of a mole-hill, they sounded so convincing that when the spell was broken by the opportunity he gave to applaud, she found herself cheering like mad and suddenly there were tears in her eyes. She hastily wiped them away; but she was conscious of feeling a little weak. One of those strange, unaccountable seizures which made her limp all over—limp and unreliable—had suddenly attacked her. Some time had elapsed since the last one, and she believed she had outgrown them. How absurd! Yes, she was actually crying; and wherefore?

Mary laughed in revolt and nerved herself. Ollie was appealing to their common sense now; he was not so remarkable after all; it must have been the contrast with his earlier efforts which had moved her. Reason-

ing thus, she recalled Sybil's prophecy. A genuine orator—that was an extreme tribute to pay to any ordinary person. But certainly Oliver possessed more of a gift than the ordinary public speaker. It was not merely his capacity to state matters clearly, but his tremendous force. This was mainly physical, of course, because he was a man. The mild mastiff's jaws looked formidable, as if he could and would, if need be, crunch an adversary to fragments; he was indeed no longer a mastiff, but a bloodhound. And as she smiled at the conceit, the thought stole upon her—will the time arrive when a woman President of the United States is able to speak like that? If women were to become prominent in politics and sway multitudes, what was to be the substitute for physical strength? The best modulated or the shrillest feminine voice must needs be at a disadvantage with masculine brute force. Even as she queried perplexedly, Mary thrilled again at the impassioned vigor of his closing. And he belonged to her—this militant, ingenuous advocate, who looked so defiant, broad-shouldered, and strong. His theme possessed him, he was outdoing himself, and, whether she was too partial in her astonishment or not, she rejoiced in being there and unobserved. Lest he catch sight of her, she had hung on the outskirts of the throng and had not pressed forward. They were shouting now frantically and waving their hats. Oliver had finished and disappeared. It was all over, and the crowd, about to disperse, surged sideways to make a passage for his automobile. A nondescript enthusiast—another big man—from behind whom she had conducted her observations to avoid the chance of discovery, trod on her toes, then turned (not from concern for he seemed unaware that she was wincing) and said with a radiant face: "That's the boy for my money.

He gave 'em hot stuff and he didn't put up a single bluff. He'd make a first-class governor himself, for any one can see he isn't crooked."

Mary glowed at the tribute and replied eagerly: "Yes, it was splendid and stimulating, wasn't it? You must make all your friends vote for him. You see," she continued at the risk of seeming to scrape acquaintance, "I know him personally and what you said is the exact truth—he's absolutely straightforward. That's perhaps his finest quality."

"Righto!" said the stranger and he added whimsically, touching his hat: "Sorry you can't slip a vote in for him yourself, lady."

"I expect to some day; there's no telling how soon," she answered stoutly.

Self-communing as she went on her way, Mary asked if she had not laid her finger on the source of Oliver's power, including its effect on herself. After all, what he said, though trenchant, was exceedingly simple. It was his extraordinary candor which counted, his gift of putting everything lucidly. He had cultivated this so amazingly that it had the semblance of fervor. It was his habit to aim straight at the mark; there were no complexities, no duplicities in his disposition. And of course in the interval since she had last heard him speak he had grown less boyish and more serious-minded. But though the secret of the fascination which he had exercised was partially explained, it remained true that he had certainly made of himself politically far more than she had supposed possible, and that she was immensely proud of him. But for the moment at least she did not intend to let him know that she had been an eavesdropper.

CHAPTER XV

ON the night of Governor Bonner's re-election, the tide of Oliver Randall's life for a second time touched high-water mark. His happiness rivalled that of the other night now nearly ten years distant when he had walked home under the quiet stars the affianced lover of Mary Arnold. Even as she was the epitome of all that was noble in womanhood, and he as the future partner of her joys and sorrows had been lifted to a higher plane by her acceptance, so now the triumph of the principles for which he had battled and the consequent restoration to office of his party leader gave to his step the elasticity of one who treads on air, for his spirit was buoyant with the vision of a transfigured world, where evils which needed correction were to be extirpated thoroughly, but under the ægis of discretion and order.

He was glad to be alone, so that he might acknowledge his joy and gratitude in silence, but it had not been possible to escape earlier. From the privacy of the newspaper office, where he had scanned feverishly the first returns, and forecasting success had lingered until assurance became glorious certainty, he had hastened to the party headquarters. The harbingers of victory had preceded him, and exultant supporters were already pouring in. For the next three hours he had stood in the vortex of a crush of vociferous partisans who made the room, dense with smoke, ring with their acclamations. His hand had been shaken so hard and so frequently that his arm

ached; his voice was hoarse from shouting and oratory, for the increasing throng of henchmen had presently necessitated an exodus to a hall where the successful candidates and those who had borne the burden of the campaign were called on and cheered to the echo. "What's the matter with Randall? He's all right!" They had yelled it a dozen times if once, and despite his struggles he had been lifted on the shoulders of his hilarious supporters and heard from the lips of the governor-elect: "There's the man to whom the chief credit belongs." It had been a whole-souled if boisterous celebration. Party victories were party victories; one had to make allowances next day by way of discount and sometimes of condonation for what was said and done. He had contributed his share to bring about the exhilarating result—when the tumult died and exaggeration ceased all would be ready to acknowledge this—and he could crawl into bed happy in the knowledge that the friends of righteous government were once more in power.

Now that he was by himself and headed straight for home, though he seemed to walk on air and felt very wide-awake, Oliver's thoughts grew introspective. He had taken a couple of drinks and smoked many more cigars than his wont, but he had been relatively temperate; his brain was clear and the night bracingly beautiful. His heart expanded in a wave of happiness as he lifted his gaze to the twinkling galaxy of stars in token of mute gratitude to the impenetrable power to whose approach they seemed the sentinels. They appeared to him to smile as he swiftly reviewed once more the agitating panorama of the last two months. It was finished now; all over except the shouting and he had listened to enough of that. He rejoiced in being at liberty to draw a deep breath once more and look around;

he was a victor and free. "Capo ha cosa fatta"—a thing done has an end—the reminiscent phrase had a spritelike pertinency. Hearing Sybil use this weeks before, he had asked her to repeat and translate it. A quotation from Dante, so she said, and it had stuck in his memory. Those Old World people certainly had a happy faculty of putting a large truth in a small compass which made latter-day epigrams sound garrulous.

The recurrence made him think of Sybil. He did not need to wonder if she would be sitting up. The certainty was already an unformulated consciousness at the back of his mind, if it had not given wings to his feet. He pictured her at the moment working tranquilly on her tapestry but impatient to hear the returns. That he had won she already knew. She had made him promise to call her up on the telephone, and he had done so the moment victory was assured. Her contagious ecstasy at the other end of the wire still vibrated in his ears. She would be waiting for him, eager to hear the full particulars, which he was looking forward to recount; and she undoubtedly would have some supper ready.

As Oliver mused, the panorama of the recent months changed to that of the last two years. It had come over him earlier, without premeditation, at the moment of recognizing Sybil's voice over the telephone that his wife had never evinced similar curiosity. During previous campaigns he had not infrequently found her in bed on his return, and she had not heard the result until next morning. She was away now. It would have been gratifying to have her at home on the occasion of this overturn, but the day was long past when her frequent peregrinations had occasioned him surprise. He had accustomed himself to them as the inevitable sequel of her business activities and also in the process reached

a point where whatever remained of bewilderment or disapproval was tinged with admiration. If she had not proved conclusively that he was mistaken in his scepticism, all which had happened since the delivery of her ultimatum was certainly a rebuke to it. When she had gravely told him two years ago that he did not appreciate her professional work, he had ascribed the charge to a woman's sensitiveness rather than to a deliberate purpose to practise her profession in the open. He had been on his guard ever since, and she had never complained; but the justice of her criticism was now apparent to this extent—that proud as he was of her, he had given her work a lower rating than it was entitled to. She had acquired a definite standing in the architectural world; the number of her clients instead of falling off appeared to be increasing; she was a very busy and a profitably busy person. There was no blinking the fact, astonishing as it appeared whenever he thought of it, that though she nominally continued to regulate the household, she gave the major portion of her time to remunerative professional work and was virtually a practising architect.

But the touchstone of his admiration, which seemed to prove his ideas old-fashioned, was the success of the triangular arrangement. Mary had told him that he would never know the difference; he had secretly doubted and she was clearly vindicated. One ingredient in his love for her had been his sympathy with her ambition as a sociological pioneer; and, though lacking himself the qualifications to be aggressive, he had always intended to be ready to abet her. He had had her word for it at the moment when he was perplexed by the radical character of her proposal that the domestic readjustment was anticipatory of the future—that some day all households which contained an evenly balanced husband and

wife would be conducted on a similar basis. She had proved herself amazingly sagacious and far-sighted. In what respect had he suffered? On the contrary, during the last two years the household machinery had seemed to run, if possible, more smoothly than before. In asking himself why, as he occasionally did, he had reached the conclusion that it was because Mary appeared extraordinarily content—happier than she had ever been since their marriage. That they were less together and had fewer opportunities for close comradeship was plain; there were intervals when she eluded if she did not repulse his overtures of devotion; but every now and then she claimed him and in those moments he invariably received a rapturous assurance that they were more to each other than ever. Any inclination to question if this were true had been repressed not merely by the thought that Mary must know, but by his own freedom from querulousness. Although he saw comparatively little of her, he realized he was cheerful and was conscious of no lack. He had learned to take her absences as a matter of course; they did not inconvenience him in any way; everything went on exactly the same. If it were anomalous that he did not miss her more—for his frank intelligence suddenly from time to time confronted him with this—he placed it to the account of her cleverness; it must be that she somehow exercised a telepathic influence over him. There could clearly be no cooling of her love for him so long as he felt no pang. To him, preoccupied with many concerns, this had served indeed as a fresh proof of Mary's suggestive individuality.

Accordingly as he proceeded on his way home, though earlier in the evening he had contrasted her attitude with Sybil's, it did not occur to him that he ought to miss her. On the contrary, as he approached the house he knew so

well in advance what his reception would be that he was half disappointed not to detect a face at the window-pane. He had caught Sybil on the watch for him one night when he was late; her eyes were tired from sewing, so she said, and she liked peering into the cool darkness. Not that she always sat up; if she had done so, he might have felt that he was imposing on her good nature. But to-night was such a gala occasion that he felt positive she would await him.

Oliver turned the key in the lock and stepped into the hall with the stealthiness of one concocting a surprise. But vigilant ears were on the alert. A soft cry of elation greeted him, which he answered with a shout. The next instant both his hands were being shaken ecstatically and Sybil, looking up into his face, was rivalling with her congratulations the enthusiasm from which he had just escaped.

"Isn't it too splendid? I felt sure—but one couldn't be absolutely certain until the votes were counted. And you will have thirty thousand majority? What! More? Fifty thousand! Oh, it's a tidal wave then. I'm so delighted, Ollie. And they owe it all to you; you're the real hero of the occasion. Yes they do, yes you are. You shan't stop me; it's true; I won't listen to a word. Didn't they all tell you so to-night? Of course they did. And now you must have something to eat; it's all ready. I thought you might bring Everett Dean or some one. But you must be dreadfully tired and you're very hoarse. Don't tell me you've had your supper already."

He banished her tone of despair by a shake of the head. "I'm hungry as a bear," he replied. Sybil while talking had already hung up his coat and hat. Putting her arm through his, she convoyed him to the dining-room. "I'm crazy to hear the full particulars by and by," she said.

The table was spread with a ham, a Camembert cheese, and an abundant supply of eggs. Two miniature American flags planted in a loaf of cake imparted a festive air to the repast. Preparations for a party; she had taken nothing for granted; but seats were in place for only two. He might have brought home any number; he had been on the point of inviting good old Everett Dean, but had deliberately refrained. He knew why now; it was because he preferred this.

"The boys went simply wild. It's a clean sweep for the entire ticket. We shall have a working majority in both branches," he said as she cut him some slices of ham and placed the cheese at his elbow.

"Eat, don't talk," she commanded, "you're hoarse as a crow already."

Obeying, he munched contentedly and watched her break some eggs in a blazer. How deftly she set to work! She was certainly a clever little cook; he had almost forgotten how things used to taste before she came. How happened it she had hit on that cheese? It almost ranked as a forbidden luxury. What would Mary say if she saw it in the bills? She could not really mind, for was not this a special celebration? Hungry was no word for it—yes, he was ravenous.

Sybil's eyes, intent on stirring the eggs, suddenly lifted. "By the way, the telegram. Here in this book"—pushing with her unoccupied hand the volume which lay beside her—"I kept it there so I shouldn't forget. More congratulations I expect."

Opening it, he replied: "No, it's from Mary. 'Unavoidably detained. Return uncertain. Well.'"

Businesslike—a man might have sent it. She had been coming back to-morrow. But no explanation and no reference to the election. Presumably she was too busy to remember this was the day. Oliver's reflection

culminated in the excuse for her, which harbored no sense of grievance and scarcely of regret. It was not the first message of the kind he had received. Undoubtedly she had the best of reasons for not coming. He could count on her congratulations when she returned and meanwhile he was being well taken care of and rejoiced with by proxy. That was a part of Mary's system. And why not?

He heard Sybil say: "What a pity! She will miss tomorrow. I shall have to save all the newspapers for her." As he dropped the telegram Oliver mechanically picked up the book which was open at the page where it had reposed as a jog to the memory and presumably as a mark. He glanced at the title, "'The New Feminism.' You reading this?" he asked in a tone of amused wonder.

"It's Mary's. My hands were too fidgety from excitement to do my needlework, and I chanced on it. I got so interested that I almost failed to hear you come in. According to the writer—he's a man too—the modern woman, far from being advanced, has scarcely begun. He'd admire Mary, but he wouldn't consider her in the van. As for me, he proves—and very convincingly too—that I'm a disgrace to my sex. He sums me up in one word—parasite."

"Parasite? That sounds rather harsh. And what does he mean?"

"I am one; it's perfectly true. A parasite is a woman not merely willing but who loves to be supported by other people—usually men. She has no other way of earning her living—and she doesn't desire one. To enable her to hang on, she tries to be very nice, but sooner than drop off she'll submit to being trampled on. That's like me exactly. I've told you as much many times in slightly different words." Her gaze was riveted on

the blazer as she spoke and she stirred with the demeanor of an absorbed artist.

Perhaps in order to understand better Oliver scanned the printed page. Suddenly he exclaimed: "I say; this is going some. 'There are signs that the day is not remote when man will not figure in the eye of a woman except as the father of her child.' The fellow must be crazy. Is she to draw the line on him after that?"

"That's as I read it. It sounds queer in Benham. But——"

"Queer? It's tommy-rot." Oliver tossed the book on the table. Somehow he felt as if his ideas had been turned topsyturvy. But the sizzling eggs were ready.

"Quick, pass your plate." Sybil supplied him with a liberal portion. They were done to a turn. She helped herself, but before tasting sat with fork poised in mid-air to complete her sentence. "The world is agog with ideas like that and something is bound to come of them before long. There are societies abroad—sisterhoods and brotherhoods both working along scientific lines. I used to hear of them. That's what makes me feel so scared. At the rate we're moving there'll be no one left for my kind to cling to. It won't be respectable; you needn't laugh." Thereupon she lowered the fork and took a preliminary mouthful. "They're right, Ollie, even if I do say so." Musing an instant, she added as if by way of called-for consolation: "Mary would never fasten on to any man. She'd rather cut her right hand off. There's where you're lucky. The new kind of woman is a great improvement so far; she really is, Ollie."

Oliver was content to take her word for this, especially as it conformed with his own opinion. He was enjoying his supper, the eggs were a masterpiece, and he asked nothing better at the moment—whatever Sybil's limitations—than to have her sitting opposite. As for the

philosophy, he was too weary and too comfortable to grapple with it. These enigmatic moods of hers, which he knew well by this time, diverted but invariably puzzled him. He never was perfectly sure what she was driving at, and yet these were the occasions when he found her most fascinating. Her assiduities were always welcome, but every now and then as to-night they had a quality of their own which made him loath to have them end. Poor little girl!

He and she had certainly become excellent friends; she had performed her part admirably. Apparently she had got into her head that she wasn't likely to marry because of being a barnacle. If Henry Thornton could see her now, he wouldn't hesitate. Henry had sent her some flowers the other day during Mary's absence. Sybil had made Oliver promise not to tell, saying: "He has more at Foxgrove than he knows what to do with, and Mary is old-fashioned in one way—she's a born match-maker."

He recalled having laughed at the time and being gratified somehow at the explanation. He wished to see her married, but not for a while yet. It would be exceedingly inconvenient for Mary; yes, and for himself. Though he was so physically comfortable at the moment, this consideration formulated itself again—with Mary coming and going so frequently, what would become of them all if Sybil did marry? The obviousness of the answer—Mary would get some one else—was far from a palliative. In spite of being on the verge of feeling pleasantly sleepy, Oliver started at the thought. It would never do; he would miss Sybil horribly. As he looked at her with a concern against which he did not seek to struggle, she rose from the table and said good night. Her desire to hear further details of his victory had given way to the conviction that he was very tired. "Joy

doesn't kill," she said, "but you've been through a terrific strain, and you must be fresh for to-morrow." He protested eagerly that it was too soon after supper to go to bed and that he wasn't in the least fatigued; that she had not heard half that there was to tell. Her threatened departure following so closely on the heels of his dread was ominous—she seemed to him to be slipping away already. To suit the action to the word he lit a cigar and said: "You told me once you were a night-owl. Now is the time to prove it."

But Sybil showed herself adamant. She smiled and shook her head. Bending toward him with her palms resting upon the table, she replied: "That isn't fair. I've kept you up late talking far too many times already. Think and you'll remember. If Mary knew how often, I should lose the reputation I've been trying so hard to acquire. But it's different now; you belong not solely to her but to the country."

Oliver frowned at the conclusion. "Don't be absurd," he ejaculated and his tone revolted unmistakably. Nevertheless his impatience hung suspended between the irrelevancy of the tribute and its sincerity, for Sybil's voice was almost caressing in its pride and her soft eyes were lustrous with the gleam of prophetic faith. Notwithstanding his objection to being made to feel shame-faced, a strange willingness to let her proceed checked his rejoinder and bade him listen.

"Oh yes, you do—that's settled now. Those you worked with always declared you had it in you. It must be glorious—you mustn't mind my saying so to your face for once, not only to have ideas but to have the power to impress them so on others that they're ready to give you anything you desire—the governorship, the presidency or—nothing. So far you've desired nothing for yourself; but that can't last forever because

the voters won't let it last. And the joy of the friends ambitious for you is that you won't be able to stay out of politics even if you try. You're next in the running—ask any one if I'm not right. And it's because I'm so proud of you that I insist on keeping you up to the mark, even though I eat my words. So good night, Ollie."

He grasped and would have detained the outstretched hand she offered had she not withdrawn it from his fervent pressure. The next moment she was gone. Her appeal had held him spellbound by its sheer ingenuousness. Though his ears would fain have shut out the honeyed praise, his inner vision had followed her pointing finger. Under its guidance, he had looked his ambition in the face, not shyly but unequivocally. Which was the more entrancing discovery, that he was doing so or that she had fathomed his unacknowledged secret and with the mien of a fascinating seer was urging him toward the goal? Political office, even the highest, remained a bawble unless it symbolized conviction. But he was free now to confess, because even self-deception had been stripped away, that it loomed the fairest prize on the horizon of opportunity when it came as the unsolicited reward of steadfast struggle in a mighty cause.

But though he thrilled in her presence as one entranced by a vision, the effect of her departure was that of anticlimax. It seemed suddenly very late and the room seemed cold. After a few puffs Oliver threw his cigar into the fireplace with a gesture of repugnance; he had smoked more than enough already and every excuse for indulgence had vanished. Yet at the moment when he had sought to detain her he would gladly have sat there all night. She had given her reason for going and he had kindled to it, but now he found himself in the mood to charge that she had done so on purpose, in order

that he might miss her. Divested of its glamour, the plea of looking after him seemed mockingly counterfeit—she had owned to eating her former words—and the invitation to glory almost a feint. But though he smarted under the sense of immediate deprivation, the vision of Sybil bending toward him across the table blotted out all other memories and lingered hoveringly in the watches of the night.

For he did not sleep until close to dawn. Fatigue, tobacco, and two cups of coffee, which Oliver recalled having swallowed in the course of the hand-shaking, claimed their toll. As often happens under such circumstances, he felt very wide-awake and his brain seemed abnormally clear. He reviewed the culminating events of the evening—the ardor of Sybil's enthusiasm over the victory, her preparations for his comfort, their strange conversation at supper, her glowing apostrophe, and her abrupt exodus. Now that he was cooler he was free from umbrage. Undeniably, the little woman understood him well—an agreeable consciousness. She anticipated his desires and stimulated the best that was in him. Until to-night he could not accuse her of having thwarted him. Her claim was true that on many an evening during the past two years she had been his sole companion and their dialogue had lasted late. Never too late, for the hours had flown. Could he ignore that she was able both to draw him out and to make him listen? So gentle, so abnegating, so assiduous, she exhaled an atmosphere which alternately lured and baffled him. She had her opinions also—definite though never obtruded—which partook of sly—was it sybaritic?—revolt against the rules by which his life was ordered. And she was always present—ever ready to dance attendance on his unuttered preferences. Verily it was almost like having a second wife.

Oliver started appalled at the thought, for its grotesqueness did not blind his probing mind to its reality. It was indeed exactly this; and, as he faced his reverie, the two women rose before him in a single frame, each arrayed in her qualities—Mary with her ideas, her rectitude, her wealth of imagination, and her queenliness; the other with her self-effacing charm, her aromatic servitude, her hero-worship, and her needlework. That there was no rivalry between them in the scale of intrinsic merit, though tacitly admitted to be beyond dispute, proved, like an academic truth, of small avail in stemming the approach of the insinuating inquiry: "What sort of allegiance can a man owe to another woman without being false to his wife?"

Oliver choked with a sort of terror and pulled the bedclothes about his ears as one in the throes of a nightmare. Such a speculation was a profitless fantasy, the logical result of lying awake; he would be all right in the morning. Then from behind the scenes another logical result, though unbidden, thrust its monstrous head and magnified his distress by exhibiting the reverse of the shield, for he suddenly found himself, by way of a sidelight on his inquiry, coquetting with the threat of the new feminism which had seemed to him so preposterous earlier in the evening. There appeared also, as a pendant to this image of—man discarded from the moment he had perpetuated the race, the prophecy which had caught the dreamer's attention in the newspapers weeks before—a woman lecturer's thinly veiled avowal that the relief sought was not extirpation of the unmarried male's licentiousness, but feminine freedom to emulate his example.

Had the world turned topsyturvy? The relations of men and women were galloping fast, and whither were they tending? Oliver drew the bedclothes closer around

his head trying to escape from thinking; yet his awakened curiosity continued to fix itself intently on the programme of feminine development as if fascinated, and then of a sudden he seemed to be hand in hand with Mary; she was running and trying to break loose and he was tagging after. How could this be? He had always held a brief for woman. And Mary of all women—he had aided and abetted her. A feeling of terror, dizzying, benumbing, seized him. What was it she was saying? That he was a parasite; that he was clinging to her and refused to drop off. He began to beg piteously, asking permission to hang on even though she continued to elude and starve him. She smiled effulgently; he heard her say: "I have my children, I am satisfied. I want no more; otherwise I should be your mistress," and in an instant he was cut off. He was falling, falling; it seemed an immeasurable distance like dropping through space. As he alighted at last uninjured but distraught, he heard a voice as from the tomb—"Capo ha cosa fatta." It was very dark. Where was he, here or in some nether world? And then close at hand he heard another voice—it sounded clear and logical like his own—ask: "If a woman can dispense with a husband at the psychological moment, why should not a man have two wives? If you had two wives, which would you prefer?"

In spite of logic, the insidious interrogatory terrified him. He sought to evade it, but he knew that the relentless brain behind the clear voice was waiting for the reply. Two wives? There must be some mistake. His monogamous instincts protested valiantly. Only one and she—albeit she had cut him off—was soaring somewhere in the empyrean; she would reclaim him presently. He was not a drone, but a man, and before this happened there was no one comparable with her. He

lay still a moment, and tried to think. He had been asleep of course, but that fall through space had awakened him. It was all a delusion, the antics of a hideous nightmare. But the voice—the one so like his own—was it not an echo of something he himself had suggested? The idea was self-born, not the fantasy of a sprite. As he groped, memory projected itself into the remnant of his slumber and his lips went through the motions of a soft shibboleth: “You don’t belong merely to Mary now but to the country.” He flushed, then lay supine from mingled glamour and horror. Stirring as one who hopes to find he is still dreaming, he raised his head only to encounter the stark and clarifying dawn at the window-pane. Oliver knew then that he was broad awake and face to face with stern, appalling reality. Which of these women was his wife and which did he prefer?

CHAPTER XVI

OF course the tragic aspect of the situation faded after Oliver was dressed and in the sunlight. Sybil was so obviously the diligent creature of routine at the breakfast-table, he accused himself of exaggeration and reinvoked the theory of nightmare. Besides, there was scant opportunity for analysis. They were all late in rising; she was very busy in serving breakfast, attending to the requirements of the children, and packing them off to school. Despite the magnitude of the political success—the latest tabulations were even more satisfactory than those of the night before—he was impatient to be at his desk. He felt intensely preoccupied already with the thought of the arrears of work awaiting him.

Such a landslide could not be passed over in silence. It was natural she should find time while they were at table to read aloud the significant paragraphs from the newspaper. These included an editorial reference that awarded him some of the glory. When, as the result of her jubilant discovery of his portrait among the heroes of the conflict, she seemed disposed to impress on the children that the victory was a personal triumph of their father's which put even the governor-elect in the shade, he interposed his protest. "You mustn't let Aunt Sybil magnify my part merely because I took the stump for a few weeks. The essential difference between Governor Bonner and me is that he goes to the State House and I retire into private life—slap-bang. I've been neglecting my business too long al-

ready." Despite her rejoinder—"You know who Warwick was, dears? Your father likes to believe he's only a Warwick. Just you wait,"—he felt confident that Arnold and Christabel as sensible children would take his word for it and not be led astray. Rejoicings were to be expected under the circumstances; save for the lingering memories of the nightmare, he would have felt like shouting too; but the important thing was to reach his office as soon as possible. An hour hence a hundred matters would be on his mind. He would have the steadying consciousness that everything at home was going on exactly as usual. He was accustomed to being left by one woman, and being looked after by another, and except that Sybil seemed pardonably elated by the election returns, in what way had their relations altered? Oliver looked at her a second time to reassure himself. He professed to see only the housekeeper, eager to please. Engaging, yes; but he had found her a congenial companion from the first day. Clearly, she was her ordinary, agreeable self and any other impression was fantasy.

Though no less busy during the next few days than he had anticipated, Oliver took occasional furtive peeps at his re-established serenity; and when he did so he winced. Sybil was exactly the same as ever, but how about himself? This inquiry which bestowed complete exoneration on her did not withhold the blame from his own shoulders. A Turk's conception of matrimony was said to be numerous wives; it might not be inconsistent with domestic happiness in France for a husband to have "affairs" after marriage as well as before; even the Englishman was not unknown to admit in private (or by example) that infidelity unless notorious was a venial offense; but every true American knew that implicit loyalty to one's wedded wife was a

native masculine ideal. A clean life for the benedict at all events—this was an unwritten article of the constitution, guaranteeing, “the sanctity of the home,” and lived up to for the inspiring reason that the American woman was so fine a product. She kept men stable; not merely by her purity and intelligent companionship, which left them no excuse for lapses, but by her nobility, which would not put up with unworthiness. Here was the key to the frequent divorces which disturbed numerous estimable people—the refusal of our women to be hoodwinked, browbeaten, or victimized. Yet no country in the world had a larger proportion of happy marriages.

Such was Oliver’s conjugal philosophy in a nutshell. So deeply was he imbued with it that he felt no temptation to palter. Nor did he need to formulate that which like an instinct was omnipresent. If it were true—that he had cast longing eyes at another woman—it was monstrous; inconceivable no less than inexcusable. For him of all men there could be no shadow of justification; his glory was his condemnation in that he had married the pick of the lot. The very impossibility proved in itself reassuring. There was no member of her sex he had ever seen comparable with Mary; he kept asserting this with conviction. On his way down-town he deliberately stopped to telegraph to her by way of bearing witness to his devotion, and he carried about in his pocket her answer received later in the day as one might carry a testimonial. Besides cordial congratulations on the victory, it contained the announcement that her return would be delayed unavoidably a few days longer. What a wonderful force was the electric current, which truly dispensed with bodily presence and kept kindred souls in touch though far apart! The idea that either awake or sleeping he had been disloyal to her merits as

a wife in favor of any other woman living distressed him by its preposterousness and presently incensed him. But he continued to be haunted by it; his mind kept reverting to the query at unexpected moments when his attention was supposed to be riveted elsewhere. And yet, though he wrote Mary a long letter that afternoon, he recognized the recurrence of his alarm as a familiar sign of disturbance in the clearing-house of his mind, which ordinarily meant that his relentless faculty of insisting on the truth at all hazards had challenged the validity of a sight-draft cashed by his easy-going optimism.

But this time instead of gratefully sustaining this vigilant monitor, as was his wont, he overruled him on the spot and started to show him the door. Oliver triumphed in the end by sheer force; but though as a result he believed the suspicion to have been so ignominiously dismissed that it would never return, he passed sundry disagreeable quarters of an hour during which even Sybil's blamelessness underwent scrutiny. His infatuation, if it existed at all, was the result of an undermining process, a quasi-revolt against Mary's rule by gradual infractions, each (like the Camembert cheese) tiny in itself. But Oliver angrily declared himself innocent of such revolt. It would have been totally incompatible with the loyalty he honestly felt to Mary. Nothing did more to confirm his confidence in his nightmare theory of the whole matter than his summary and instinctive rejection of such privity. He became dogmatically serene; but serene like one who, having crushed a viper's head, is sensible of the body wriggling beneath his foot.

The pressure of business and the echoes of the contest aided him to believe himself the prey of a whimsical delusion which had no basis in reality. Between congrat-

ulations and conferences he was so driven that it was easy to avoid thinking, now that he was bent on doing so. Two days down-town and two evenings at home elapsed without impairment of his fool's paradise. The third was his birthday, an anniversary which he, like most men, was content to have ignored. He was thirty-eight, far too old to be made a fuss over; in a little while he would be forty. He remembered the date on waking; and also that Mary was away from home; consequently there would be no cake with candles at dinner, one for each year. Just as well, for the last bore a resemblance to Birnam Wood. From this moment, absorbed by the exigencies of a very busy day, Oliver never recurred to his first waking thought again. Returning home at nightfall slightly later than his custom, he took for granted that Sybil was dressing for dinner. Having made his own preparations, he came down-stairs without suspicion and the next instant he was beset by an avalanche of a dozen friends of both sexes, congregated in the hall, who burst upon him with birthday greetings and bearing appropriate tokens, by the downpour of which he was almost swept off his feet.

Though dazed for the moment, it did not take Oliver long to realize he was the victim of a surprise-party; but as his glance sped around the ring of gleeful faces, his dismay was mitigated by the discovery that all the invaders were old and intimate friends. Everett Dean, Ham and Barbara Ford, "Doc" Ferguson, David Parks (where had he fallen from?), all his ancient pals in fact, with their wives if they had any and including—yes, by Jove! there they were—the George Pattersons. The next instant he was shaking Nettie's hand effusively with both of his and exclaiming in response to her almost breathless ejaculations of rapture: "Well—well—well, this is a cheering sight and no mistake."

"It was sweet of Sybil to ask us. We'd have been broken-hearted not to be here. I said to George on the way over I was sure you'd be thrilled to see us again. And besides this trophy"—Mrs. Patterson as she spoke brandished a large gilt cardboard crown which she tried to place on his head—"I've brought a batch of my mince pies for supper. You used to love them you remember before you were famous. Oh, you men are such dears there's no doing enough for you."

In spite of the palaver, Oliver knew that he was genuinely glad to see her and George. He could hear Mary say, "How disgusting"; but Nettie was so well meaning and so hearty that he did not mind her foolishness. He even submitted to the puerility of the paper crown, for now that he was in for it, he must enter into the spirit of the affair and show himself a good sport. It was very amiable of them all to turn out in his honor. At the same time he was conscious of a guilty feeling; if Mary had been at home the Pattersons would never have been there. And Nettie had let the cat out of the bag. Sybil had been the prime mover in this spontaneous gathering of his friends. Doubtless she had taken Everett Dean or Ham into her counsels, but it was clear she was the arch-conspirator.

He caught her eyes as she stood on the outskirts of the invading circle. She was laughing roguishly, yet with a pleading expression which implored his forgiveness. When there was a chance she slipped forward to say triumphantly:

"And you didn't suspect a thing, did you, Ollie? I was so afraid you would." She beamed as he shook his head. "You fooled me completely, Sybil, and—and I'm trying to like it." She clapped her hands ecstatically. Her contagious laughter was reflected in the gaiety of her fellow conspirators. Oliver noticed that she had

on a brand-new gown for the occasion—a sort of sea-green symphony—and that she wore her hair so low as to cover her ears in the newest fashion. She looked to him more charming than he had ever seen her, and apparently unaware of the enormity of having invited Nettie Patterson. The uncomfortable suspicion which had insinuated itself for an instant—“Did she do it on purpose?”—vanished. She seemed frank and joyous as a child pleased with a new toy. The breach of discipline was obviously unintentional; and as such a delightful mistake for everybody present. Oliver, whose spirits in the congenial atmosphere of so many friends were rising every minute, rejoiced in acquitting her of guile.

But when the doors of the dining-room were opened his eyes dilated with wonder and he did not feel so sure. The table, spread with a delectable array of tempting viands and ablaze with light, presented such a contrast to the repast which Mary would have provided, that it seemed a feast fit for the gormandizing gods. There were flowers in tall vases and the cloth was strewn with single roses. Oysters in various guises, a Virginia ham, ducks, patties, salads, the ingredients for a Welsh rabbit, moulds of ice-cream, sweetmeats galore, and amid the profusion of dishes sundry bottles which from their shape could contain nothing but champagne—here was a veritable banquet which bade Oliver gasp and murmur to himself: “Sumptuous!—but is not this insubordination?”

How had she dared? Yet, as he asked the question, explanations were forthcoming. Every one had brought something; the supper was co-operative, a circumstance which apportioned the responsibility. It transpired that “Doc” Ferguson had shot the ducks, and the genuine Virginia ham was from the larder of the “opulent literary

Fords" in the words of the housekeeper of that family. Nettie Patterson, who sat beside Oliver and seemed almost ready to embrace him, whispered that the floral decorations were from George and her. Much of the splendor and glitter was attributable to the cake with thirty-eight candles which occupied the centre of the table; huger and more elaborately ornamented with frosting than its predecessors, but merely the perpetuation of a sanctified custom. And as if she had fathomed his qualms and wished to give them a quietus, Sybil managed to glide from her seat, just as the glasses were being filled, in order to whisper: "The champagne is my contribution. *Capo ha cosa fatta.*" She added in the mirthful tone of one sharing a harmless confidence: "So Mary won't have to know."

Sybil was gone before he could protest at her prodigality. The idea of her paying for the wine! But it was generous of her if embarrassing, and in her own words over and done with. At all events, her exoneration—and hence his own—from household extravagance was now complete. What at first blush had worn the suspicious semblance of a Roman revel had become merely a gala festivity planned by loyal, warm-hearted friends which he was now free to enjoy. An affair a little out of the ordinary in that his birthday followed so close on victory at the polls, but humanly harmless if one was there to see.

Here was the obvious significance of Sybil's tag, the memory of which lingered like the tap of a velvety paw. Mary need not know—had better not know; for one simple reason—lest she misunderstand. If she were on the spot she would realize that the breach was neither his fault nor Sybil's, but the result of a random impulse magnified by circumstances. He would inform her of the surprise-party of course, but the details—the cold

details liable to shock her—might advantageously be suppressed. Though conscious that this sharing of a secret had established a new bond between him and Sybil, Oliver silenced the guilty sense of complicity by dwelling on the sagacity of this suggestion. Mary, who had so many concerns, would be spared needless worry by judicious summarizing and nothing was to be gained by supplying particulars which might give what was really a natural and delightful affair the color of an orgy. Was not her dearest friend Barbara among the gayest of the guests? This point of view was so convincing at the moment that Oliver's qualms disappeared as if by magic, and looking around the table with the care-free brow of one who knows he is in the house of his friends, he gave himself up unreservedly to enjoyment. They had been very kind to come; he must do his part and put his best foot forward. Every one seemed in the happiest vein, and even though Nettie did butter him with blarney, there was no blinking the fact that the cockles of his heart had been warmed by the presence of the Pattersons. It was like old times to be sitting at Nettie's portly elbow while she performed the important ceremony of making a Welsh rabbit—her gastronomic specialty. The next moment Ham Ford, rapping on the table to command order, pronounced himself the toastmaster. But there were to be no remarks except the speaker's own—so nobody need worry.

He would be brief, very brief, but a certain formality could not be dispensed with, notwithstanding the well-known and inveterate modesty of one whose virtues were as many and resplendent as the candles sparkling in honor of his nativity. Ham caracoled around his theme for a few moments, then showed himself merciful; pausing to make sure that every one's glass was full to the brim before he launched his toast:

"A health to Oliver Randall, able lawyer, public-spirited citizen, and loyal friend—our friend; who does well whatever he sets out to do and never has a swelled head, God bless him; no heel taps!"

Then, instead of sitting down as to a less whimsical person would have seemed appropriate, Ham, having drained his glass, retained the floor by informing the beneficiary that he was excused from responding because of hoarseness and general commiseration for one on whom an army of frenzied admirers had so recently descended. "And yet," Ham continued with a philosophic air, "this occasion would not be complete without some reference to her whose absence we so heartily deplore—the fair mistress of this house. Parenthetically speaking, you behold in me an object-lesson in the science of domestic opportunity—and hence one peculiarly fitted to make her excuses. In accounting for the status of the opulent literary Fords, the genius of woman is entitled to some credit. Nevertheless I should be lacking in loyalty to my own sex if I failed to point out that, but for my decision to avoid the beaten track of masculine tradition, genius would have been smothered and we as mates have contributed nothing to the most perplexing and persistent problem of civilization. Why do I ride in my own automobile and twiddle my thumbs? Because I made a woman's job my own and mastered it. The envious will add 'and let her do yours,' which is the glorious truth; otherwise Barbara and I would belong to the undistinguishable proletariat. Our proudest boast is that we're social pioneers. At the same time (strictly between ourselves, as they're demanding my picture for the 'movies,') it has been a cinch for both of us. Original, but easy as falling off a log and soft as a tub of butter. And why have I dragged us in? Because a far more significant example of the pioneer spirit in con-

jugal life is to be found under this roof; an example illuminating for the race because typical, not like that of the opulent literary Fords, extraordinary, hence sporadic. In our case you all know to whom the chief credit for originality belongs"—Ham tapped his faultlessly ironed shirt-front—"but in the newer instance we take off our hats to the woman; to her who is mistress without being slave of the domestic hearth; who has won fame and appreciably enhanced the income of the life partnership, yet guarded the Penates so scrupulously that we could say her husband need not miss her if we didn't know he loves her all the more because of her initiative; and who by a charmingly efficient vicegerent (a treasure in herself) is present in spirit even when we most deplore her absence. And so I propose the real toast of the evening—here's to her who has made the world her debtor by a successful experiment, the inventor of the Randall domestic triumvirate!"

A shout of gleeful approval followed by the waving of glasses greeted this sally, "The Randall domestic triumvirate"! As the company subsided after drinking the toast every one seemed in the best of humor. Ham had met the situation—or dodged it—famously. But to Oliver's ears as he listened the speech was in the nature of a restorative. Ham was whimsical, and one could never be positive that he was not cryptic; but surely to-night he must mean exactly what he said. Everything was true and especially the comment—very discerning of Ham—that he was so well cared for he need not have missed Mary save for being more in love with her than ever. Oliver held on to this assurance as one in peril clings to a life-buoy. And what a graceful thoroughly appropriate compliment Ham had paid Sybil. She was evidently entirely pleased; was beaming contentedly and without embarrassment as became a

vicegerent, which was all she was. Ham was right—the domestic experiment was a huge success, and the credit all belonged to Mary.

Amid the echoes of approval round the table Oliver distinguished the words of Nettie Patterson at his elbow: “Ham’s a dear. He brought out Mary’s cleverness completely, didn’t he? It’s such a wonderful arrangement for you having them both. Sybil is able to fill in just the chinks which Mary has no time to attend to. I’m looking after you to-night, so pass your plate for some of this rabbit while it’s hot.” As Nettie served him bounteously, Barbara, two seats away, leaned across to declare: “It’s the next best thing to having dear Mary present to hear her praises sung. Ham spoke for every one here. You must be egregiously proud of what she has accomplished, Ollie. And the point is, as Ham says, that she has made a career for herself in the face of obstacles.”

Barbara’s face was suffused with pleasure. What more reassuring sign could he wish than this spontaneous commendation from Mary’s closest friend? Nor did Oliver’s propped-up serenity experience another qualm until the guests were gone and he found himself in the stillness of the house alone with Sybil. The later evening had flown as if on wings. He had believed himself the victim of a delusion—cured; then suddenly standing in her presence he realized he had cheated himself and that what he had dreaded was appallingly true. Restless, like one drawn by a magnet, he followed her from the hall into the dining-room. The extra maids hired for the occasion had just begun to remove the remains of the feast. Once more he seemed to have assisted at a revel; the disorder of the flower-scattered table with its broken viands and tell-tale empty bottles brought back his sense of guilt. He

knew that he had been led to do that of which his wife disapproved and in the same breath he knew that he longed to possess—to seize and embrace this tempting woman who mocked him—because he must not—with the eyes of a second wife. Must not? He could—he would. It had come to this; he was a man and he longed to take her in his arms and crush her mouth with kisses.

But though his fingers itched to do so she was safe. Even in the vicinity of her maids this fever had come upon him. Did she guess what was in his mind? Was this the key to the provocative smile upon her lips, “I know, but you dare not”; or was she thinking, “We’ve a secret now between us that’s the beginning of the end”? Either was maddening, yet a rapturous challenge. She had turned at his approach and stood leaning backward with her hands against the table, soft-eyed, a little dishevelled yet lustrous in her sea-green symphony. He heard her say with the delight of a tired child:

“Wasn’t it a grand success? You were so surprised, Ollie. Every one rejoiced in being here to do you honor. And you didn’t mind the supper, did you, just for once?”

She seemed to plead, but was she laughing at him? “Everything was perfect, and you most of all. You’re a witch, and you’ve bewitched me.” Unequivocal as his impetuous words were, they sounded lukewarm and paltry to his ear. But he let his eyes attest the fervor which he dared not impart to his tongue. Her air of surprise seemed a cross between confusion and piquancy. Her mounting color disclosed that she understood and was abashed; yet simultaneously the childlike fatigue disappeared; she had become alert, glowing, interested as one who chooses not to believe for the sake of pro-

longing a delicious suspense, destined to end in incredible joy. Was there not even in her expression that which said: "I wondered if you ever would and now you have."

Yet she was on her guard. Though she did not repulse him, plainly she was using her wits. She turned to give a few instructions which left her free to retire and in another moment before he could interpose she had glided past him to the hall and toward the staircase. Looking back at him from this vantage-point, her hand upon the banister, she said relentlessly: "It was great fun, wasn't it? But I'm very tired. Good night."

She had escaped; he could see she knew and was not offended. In the instant while she lingered their eyes met and in them the baffled, infatuated Oliver detected a light which was half triumphant, half indulgent. It seemed to him as if having shut the door of discretion firmly in his face, she had opened it a crack to whisper: "We have a secret now that is a secret. But this needs thinking over."

Swiftly without another word or look she went upstairs. Riveted to the spot, Oliver stared after her like one who having sought to clasp flesh and blood feels his arms embrace the empty air. And as the vision vanished, the horror of his plight ranged itself beside his unrepentance. His haunting doubts had become certainties. He loved this entrancing chameleon-like woman; he longed for her. In truth she had bewitched him. And if he loved her, what of his eternal devotion to his wedded wife? Could a man have two loves at once? If not, which did he wish to put away?

She was gone and he was face to face with an agonizing reality. Oliver walked into the brightly lighted drawing-room and threw himself into a chair. Already

his unflinching frankness demanded a hearing. Where would his dilemma find its familiar counterpart except in the pages of a French novel? To think that he, Oliver Randall, should be in such a fix! Here, too, in Benham, where the democratic ideal of fidelity to one's wife put to the blush the loose standards of Old World aristocracy, an ideal which in his own instance was so integral an article of faith that a year ago he would have mistrusted the rising of the sun sooner than his faithfulness to the woman whom he had singled out from all women. And such a woman! The noblest, most adorable, most companionable of her sex. What was it that had happened? Did he not worship still the very ground she trod on?

Brooding, he looked around the familiar room. With what vivid reminders of both did it abound! As in a trance he beheld again Mary at her art work, sublime, preoccupied, and Sybil at her embroidery ever ready to smile and chat with him between the stitches. How many evenings they had spent like this, himself sandwiched, as it were, between the two.

Oliver started at the trick of memory. And as he did so the inchoate thought shaped itself: "Why did Mary throw her in my way?" Never before since his initial talk with his wife as to the wisdom of the domestic experiment had this point of view occurred to him. Now it possessed him with a fierce rush, threatening to shatter the cathedral of Mary's infallibility and bringing some meed of exculpation for himself. Why had she taken the risk? After all he was human; the lure of sex was still the lure of sex, making man's will brittle as glass.

But though he saw this plainly, Oliver's respite from self-reproach was short-lived. Swift as the accusation came the convicting answer: "Why? Because she trusted you so implicitly she would never have dreamed of doubt-

ing you. Because, knowing you were you, she felt free to close her eyes and carry out her plans." Here was her vindication in a single phrase—her confidence in him. So cogent was its appeal that the impulse of the previous moment to apportion the blame seemed craven. The responsibility was solely his—because he had fallen, fallen from his high estate. He had abused her trust, and was in the category of those who would have one standard for the man and another for the woman. What would he think of Mary if it were she instead of him? The situation was monstrous, because so real and unescapable.

An optimist at heart, it had been a part of Oliver's outlook to despise evil; to think of Satan as powerless against the spear of the righteous man of firm purpose, not as lying in lurk and disputing every man's soul. The precepts of Calvin were as remote from his philosophy as black from white. But now as he clinched his fingers in the stress of his predicament he seemed to himself to be prostrate amid the ruins of his own vain-gloriousness with the devil smiling in his face. Scrutiny of the position had simply increased his horror and consternation without providing an escape. He loved Mary still—his better self insisted on this; how then explain that at a word he would bound to the side of her who lay safe up-stairs, and that his dearest thought at the moment was curiosity to know if his infatuation was reciprocated. Here was the hideous reality. How was it that his house of bliss had fallen about his ears and what was to be the sequel?

CHAPTER XVII

RELAXING comfortably in the train on her way from New York to Benham, Mary was glad of a fresh opportunity to audit her account with life. It had been her habit to do so at intervals ever since she could remember. These pauses were indispensable in her scheme of existence, for they combined encouragement with correction. But many months had flown since she had last drawn her trial-balance, and the spirit moved her to appropriate these hours of freedom to introspection which would reveal—and flatteringly she hoped—just where she stood. There were magazines and a book on her lap, her bag held business papers which she intended to read presently, but her immediate desire was to close her eyes and think.

As was usually the case, a moving cause had impelled her thoughts into this channel. The ties which bound her to the Jerrold sisters were no longer merely professional. She was on terms of intimate friendship with both. They were Carrie, Deborah, and Mary to each other now; and though the trio operated continuously as a triumvirate however far apart, they occasionally became one in a physical sense by a collective pilgrimage to some other city—New York, Washington, Boston. The call was not infrequently one of the various conventions to which they were delegates; but every now and then they indulged deliberately in what they termed a spree, which meant that, though their impetus was the necessity to re-examine the field of “uplift,” and so replenish their resources, they took quarters at the newest hotels and

under the best auspices made a festive round of everything worth seeing. On these occasions the others always made it easy for Mary not to pay her way by alleging professional employment—the need to seek out and pass upon some object of art or new architectural device—as the ostensible quest.

The sudden decision of the Jerrold sisters to take one of these trips had been the true cause of Mary's detention and of her missing her husband's birthday. Such opportunities were not to be neglected, for, besides inspiration and enjoyment, they brought her in contact with influential people who might give her orders. The direct object of the expedition was to inspect some imported tapestries in New York. These turned out to be exactly what Mary had been hoping to hit upon for Mrs. Walworth; and with this errand disposed of they had been free to crowd as many sensations as possible into the three days.

She had hobnobbed with old acquaintances, both men and women, and made new. She had imbibed fresh ideas and revived her former impressions; could one return to New York even after a short interval and be blind to the kaleidoscopic forces ever at work? She had listened to various compelling speakers, and the triumvirate was carrying back the gospel of a minimum wage for women as a panacea which would decimate the ranks of prostitution. It had been inspiring also to note that whispers of an impending crusade against the double sex standard were in the air. One could not be five minutes in the company of any group of earnest people without realizing this. Nothing was launched as yet; the leaders were mulling over the mode of attack; the elect still talked below their breath and guardedly. But during their stay a tragic story passed on by word of mouth and under pledge of secrecy, of the kidnapping

in Central Park in broad daylight of a fashionable young woman of spotless reputation (whose name was withheld) and her transfer to a house of evil repute had given a fresh fillip to the latest sentiment.

To these general truths and enthusiasms gleaned during Mary's sojourn had been added the agreeable consciousness, from the personal point of view experienced for the first time in a strange city, that people seemed to have heard of her. To be sure, the chaperonage of her companions helped. She was aware they sang her praises aloud or, if proximity forbade, by whispers and nudges. But not infrequently (considering how many persons she met) she had seen at the mention of her name the gleam of gratified identification replace the fatuous look so apt to accompany introductions. Some alluded to the pictures in one of the leading magazines of the sunken garden which was the most striking feature of the Walworth embellishment; others, though familiar with her work only by hearsay, were unmistakably prepossessed in its favor. The compliments were not merely from lay people but from professionals. Her friend Mr. Ashurst had grasped her by the hand and said effusively: "Dear lady, I have seen it. You have pulled it off. The big idea is there." Even Mr. Tirrell—and this was the sweetest morsel of all—had looked at her searchingly when they met, as if with a new interest, and muttered under the cave of his big mustache: "They tell me you are making progress." The experience had been all she could have wished. Not that she had become a personage or even a celebrity; she was too modest not to appreciate exactly where she stood. But she had established more than a local reputation, which bade fair in time to become national renown if her work showed no falling off.

In aid of another complacent thought Mary opened

her eyes to steal a glance across the aisle of the Pullman at her two richly attired companions. Highly intelligent, executive, wide-awake women unquestionably, though each was dozing at the moment in the face of the problem literature in her lap. But no wonder after the hectic diversifications of the week. She admired them unreservedly, and yet from the point of view of the personal equation she obviously possessed one advantage—and this without disparagement to the quality of their zeal or the value of their services in behalf of feminism: It was that they with all their good intentions were but exhorters, while she was a practical, living exemplar of the new womanhood which was replacing the old. By force of circumstances they were chiefly theorizers, but she was a workaday exponent in the flesh. Not that Carrie and Deborah did not give her the credit of this; indeed their fondness and undisguised admiration were largely based on it. The kernel of the advantage lay in the single factor that she had a husband in sympathy with the modern domestic programme and who walked hand in hand with her, whereas they were still parasitic wives notwithstanding their views, for the reason that their husbands had not proved amenable to them. Neither wife had succeeded in modifying her husband's attitude. The husbands were the antipodes of each other (Gregory Walworth being over head and ears in big business and Clifford Palmer one of Benham's *jeunesse dorée*), but they were alike in this, that they gave their wives their heads and a liberal allowance, but would not permit experiments at home. The reason the men were able to prevail was clear, but pitiful—they held the purse-strings. Poor Carrie and Deborah were virtually kites upon a cord who, just as they began to soar, could be jerked back to earth by a tyrannical grip.

How different it was with her! She was living as a woman should live, and her friends, in spite of their surface activities, resembled birds who beat against the bars of a golden cage. The industrial independence of woman, so that she would be beholden to no man for a livelihood and wear his label as part of the bargain. This was the key-note of the sex relation of the future. She had heard a lecturer, a woman with a soft, musical yet far-reaching voice, state the proposition wonderfully but a few days before. It had rid her of the craven doubt entertained on the day when she heard Oliver speak from the automobile, whether any woman's oratory could suffice to install her in the White House. Yes, she could afford to congratulate herself on her husband, and she was glad to be on her way home. Oliver had been writing more frequently than his wont and longer letters too. Was he lonely? It was meet that he should be just a little. He had informed her of the surprise-party. It appeared that his friends had descended on him and that Sybil had been equal to the emergency. She was sorry to have missed it; but to have returned in time would have deprived her of a vivid and valuable experience. Dearest Oliver! She yearned to see him again, to hear of his doings, and to recount the new movements which were in the air. With the thought of the joy of their meeting after the unusually long absence, there flashed into Mary's mind a dream which had been quiescent for many months. A sister for Christabel would be welcome now, if her advent might be timed to avoid conflict with any important piece of architectural work. At least the fates might be trusted—or tempted! Before the thought was fairly formulated, Mary was smilingly reflecting that hers was not the prayer for a man child—formula of a man-governed world—but rather the passionate hope that she might

have a bevy of girls to share the golden opportunities of the next quarter-century—the date to be known for all time as the Woman's Period—the day of complete equalization of the sexes, and the full recognition of the high place of woman in the scheme of race development.

As has been stated, these reflections of Mary's, though spontaneous, were not without a moving cause. Among the lecturers to whom she had listened in New York was one whose words had aroused her ire, but arrested her attention. She would have avoided an antisuffrage address from the same motives that would have led her to dodge a doll's tea-party where the hostess had no claims on her. But this speaker had sprung a trap after enticing into the hall two hundred of the most thoughtful women of the metropolis by the skilful bait of his subject, "Progress and the Feminine Dynasty." The rumor had preceded him that his views were suggestive; and so they proved to be, but in a sense totally different from what Mary had expected. So speciously sympathetic was his opening, that she was saying to herself here was a man who comprehended women; but in another moment he whisked about from comprehension to contumely by launching the invidious inquiry: "Is the modern woman—notably the woman of the United States—too self-sufficient?" This for a leading text. His manner was that of the seeker after truth, but as he warmed to his theme it was clear he was biassed and under the cover of a judicial attitude was seizing the opportunity to administer a drubbing to his feminine hearers. And then as a corollary to the original charge he insinuated that this same modern American woman lacked sex.

Suave as the language was on the surface, its purport when pondered was unmistakable. Mary had felt her

cheeks burn as she listened, still she was fascinated. The man knew his subject, was thoroughly up-to-date, and showed almost as much polite contempt for the conventional twaddle which would restore the old bondage as any champion of her sex could desire. Moreover his accusation was not novel. She kept saying this to herself. Nevertheless she was held spellbound until it suddenly seemed as if the issue was between her and him. So definite was the antagonism between them that the lecturer had the effect of ignoring the rest of the audience and talking straight at her. This Mary knew of course was imaginary. But she would have liked to rise from her seat and exclaim: "Your taunt—your two taunts—may have been true in the early stages of the revolt. Metallic, cold, self-absorbed, sexless even, there were grounds for the criticism before we got our bearings. But the latest product, the twentieth-century woman—and I am a specimen—is a breathing, throbbing refutation of these selfsame charges, whatever else her faults. How is it that I know? Because forewarned and also self-admonished, I fixed my attention on guarding against these very dangers. Ostrich-like self-sufficiency which wrecks the home? You would not say so if you could take a peep at my domestic arrangements, see how adequate they are and how thoroughly satisfied my husband is with what I do for him. And as for lack of sex—" This of course might be challenged but not openly discussed in a public meeting, but she could have opened his eyes in private. She had smiled and murmured to herself: "How little he knows!" An inveterate man, he confounded brutish appetite with the cumulative ecstasy of generative longing. Mary had felt like sending him a copy of "The Bee" appropriately underscored, with an anonymous line to say: "At suitable moments that's what the woman of to-day is like."

She had been obliged to hold her peace for there was no *questionnaire* following the meeting. She gave the lecturer the credit of being suggestive—but he was antipathetic for the simple reason that he did not know the innermost facts of modern married life. Let the galled jade wince, her withers (at all events) were unwrung, such was Mary's frame of mind as she left the hall. And a gratifying echo was provided by Mrs. Walworth's verdict uttered the moment they were in the automobile.

"He's clever—and sophisticated—but such men do more harm as old fogies in disguise than the out-and-out reactionaries. I felt like saying: 'If you knew my friend Mary Arnold you'd recognize a splendid instance to the contrary and get an inkling that we modern women are mending our fences all along the line faster than our critics can keep up with us.'"

Her own reply had come from the bottom of her heart: "How delightful to hear you say so. That's what I've tried to be above all else—my husband's true companion and true lover." Yet, despite this conviction, the impression of the lecture had remained and now in this welcome breathing-spell guided her thoughts. Leaning back in her chair again, she purposely scrutinized her record, subjecting it to what Ham Ford called the acid test. She reviewed searchingly the later course of her married life. If she was too self-sufficient, she wished to know the ugly fact; for the fault was hideous, signifying spiritual blindness, which in its essence was the unforgivable sin.

Her record emerged from the ordeal unblemished. She had never doubted, but she wished to make assurance doubly sure. The two stood out together—her career and her marriage—separate yet interdependent. Neither great experience of life could be complete with-

out the other. Could she not say with truth that she did not know of which she was the prouder? Proud too not merely of the tangible evidences of happiness, but proud that as deviations from the beaten path each had justified itself so unmistakably. Nevertheless Mary resolved, in order to place the seal upon her self-sought vindication, to take a fresh look when she reached home. As it was, she had delayed her periodical survey longer than usual. This, to be sure, was because everything was running so smoothly. But she acknowledged, that sociologically speaking the keystone of her domestic paradise was still an experiment. Circumstances had combined to keep her away from home at a time when she should have been there. She was curious to hear about the surprise-party. Oliver, though a more voluminous correspondent than usual, had supplied but scant particulars regarding this. It would be a joy to be enfolded once more by the arms of her big, faithful mastiff. She had made up her mind, as amends for her absence on his birthday, to divulge her discovery—and how she had discovered—that on the trail of his political enemies he could become a fierce bloodhound.

Whatever he might pretend, Ollie must realize by now they were running neck and neck—the ideal conjugal situation. For, though their pursuits were so different, there might have been secret heart-burnings if either had notably outstripped the other. Not every man of mediocre attainments could be relied on (as yet) to adopt Hamilton Ford's philosophy. A droll, simple soul; but if one element of greatness was the wisdom to apply the "acid test" relentlessly, Ham was nearly great. As a consequence, his wife was one of the literary lights of the country. Must not, however, the companionship be more exhilarating and more complete where the husband held his own?

When Mary was well settled at home, her first impression of conditions there was thoroughly reassuring. Oliver appeared highly pleased to have her back; not merely for the first twenty-four hours, but after she had settled into the domestic traces. He lavished little endearments upon her more frequently than his wont and sought her society at odd moments with an assiduity which seemed deliberate, as if he were afraid of losing her again. This could only mean one thing—that he was more in love with her than ever. When, just to tease him, she remarked on the third day that she might have to make another excursion very soon, she noticed his brow darken; he looked troubled, half annoyed, and half distressed. She recognized that he was somehow different from his usual self, but she thought nothing of it at the moment except as flattering.

Necessarily the first hours were appropriated to recounting the details of her trip and hearing the home news. While she talked and listened at the dinner-table she satisfied herself first as to the children. They appeared in the pink of condition, though both were growing like weeds—and approaching the hobbledohoy age, when parental pride must chasten itself temporarily and be content to hope. Arnold, overdeveloped physically for his years, had the big limbs and broad shoulders of his father. He showed signs too of the same sterling qualities. But he had her eyes and an antelope-like alertness in his movements, which promised later to be a mental characteristic also. She counted on him to set the world on fire, but temporarily he had the impassivity of a partly chiselled statue and his teeth were in splints. In Christabel, more responsive than her brother, she discerned the image of her earlier self, awkward, unformed, yet already wistful and emulous of the interests of the spirit. An ugly duckling outwardly, yet a torch-bearer

in embryo. What fun they would have together presently!

And Sybil? Mary chose a moment when her factotum was occupied to observe her sharply. Still placidly imitative and content with her usual routine. It was apparent too that the life agreed with her, for she looked happy and was growing prettier. The contour of her cheeks was rounder or was it the new fashion of doing the hair which hid her ears? The style was rather suggestive of Babylon—but no one could be blamed for following the style, as non-conformity soon made one look queerer still. She intended to delay a little herself and then flash it some day on Oliver. It would be inconvenient to lose Sybil, but if only for curiosity's sake she wished to know how the affair with Henry Thornton stood. So when Oliver had gone for the day she tried to find out. Sybil admitted that he had been to call several times. He had been prevented from coming to the surprise-party, but had sent Oliver some lovely orchids. Mary chuckled inwardly and said roguishly: "For Ollie of course. And I don't imagine the dear boy has the least suspicion anything is going on." She meant this to be a little forward in the hope of extracting a confession from Sybil's demureness. The response: "I think he knows all there is to know, and doesn't like it very well," was somewhat Delphic. The disclaimer was conventional, but the snapper at the end sounded odd. Despite her naïve air, it seemed to Mary as if Sybil had suddenly given her a little dab.

"You confided in him, then?" she said.

"There isn't anything to confide, I assure you, Mary. And even if what you're hinting at were true, it takes two parties to make a bargain. I'm very happy where I am."

This might be a polite way of saying mind your own

business, but did not as a caveat of genuine doubt merit serious consideration. That a girl of Sybil's circumstances and temperament should refuse such an offer was so incredible that Mary disposed of the coy assumption of maidenly dignity by the glib retort: "Take all the time you need, Sybil dear, and the more you take the better the Randall household will be pleased. But men, and especially the right man, have a way of being terribly persistent. So watch out." Then she continued, for the significance of the snapper was now revealed: "Every one in the house would miss you exceedingly. And Ollie, I dare say, most of all."

"I really think he would, Mary."

Again she got the impression of being slyly thrust at. On the surface the words were a harmless and ingenuous asseveration, but there was something in the way they were said which suggested the diabolic. Was the intonation responsible or did the effect lurk in the very candor of the acquiescence which had suddenly set in startling relief an ordinary self-evident fact? The latter must be it; but wherefore? What more natural than Oliver's keen regret in case the existing arrangement came to an end? Vaguely troubled, she fixed her eyes on Sybil's face, but all she could read was the disarming coquetry of a very pretty woman of the clinging type pleased at putting a teasing inquirer on the wrong scent. The impression must be fantasy, or again her hair, which emphasized her piquancy as by a hood. Nevertheless the impression lingered and as the day wore on developed into a sense that, though everything was outwardly unaltered, Sybil—and Oliver also—had changed intangibly during her absence.

But the slight uneasiness was banished for the moment by the news which Oliver brought home that evening. Governor Bonner had sent for him and

asked permission to nominate him for the State court of appeals. There was a vacancy through death for an unexpired term, and if he gave consent his name would be sent in. Eight years must elapse before he would have to stand for re-election and in the case of the highest judiciary the scramble for office was frequently so far relaxed that all parties united on the same candidate.

"It's virtually a life office, then?"

"Not necessarily. But if I did well the probabilities are——"

"You would be sure to do well. That's just the sort of position you would fill admirably, Ollie. It requires wisdom and probity, and it's a great honor, isn't it?"

"In theory one of the greatest. The pay is moderate, but it's larger than in some States—nine thousand a year."

"That's not so bad—with what I earn."

Mary did not fail to detect the glance, almost in the nature of a challenge, which her remark elicited. "Do you realize," she added, "that my commissions for the last twelve months amount to nearly eight thousand?"

"As much as that?"

But why did he answer so perfunctorily, as if it were a pittance which barely counted? "And for some time to come I see no reason why I should not do still better."

"You will, I hope. My share of the net firm receipts this year was fifteen thousand—our best by far, notwithstanding the time taken out for the election."

This was more than Mary had supposed. It was some time since he had mentioned exact figures and though she knew he was prospering, she had cherished secretly the hope that they were running neck and neck financially too. Was it a twinge of envy which made her grow grave and remark a little insistently: "Sup—

posing I earned only seven—seven and nine would be sixteen. The governor must think you're peculiarly qualified or he wouldn't have offered you the place."

"Presumably he thinks so. But that's just the point. The pecuniary question is wholly secondary. On the bench—even the highest bench—I should be shelved."

They were in Mary's bedroom and she was doing her hair for dinner. Oliver had entered to communicate to her the important tidings. Now at this speech she looked up at his reflection in the mirror and echoed the last word. "Why shelved?"

"A judge has to burn his bridges. I should be cut off from everything else, and I fear I might become restless."

"Restless for what?" she inquired, staring at his image. The next instant she divined and murmured: "Oh politics, I suppose."

"Politics in the broad sense, yes."

"But what would they lead to? Only office. And now you have it. Isn't it unusual for so young a man to be offered the highest court?"

"Comparatively. And it's just because I'm still young that I hesitate. In fact I'm disposed to decline. I'd rather keep a finger in the pie so as to have a hand in framing the laws."

"But I thought——"

"Oh no. A judge's functions are to interpret existing laws. He has no share in making them, and he must keep his mouth shut. That's what I should miss, I fear. Something big in the line of ideas would come along and I should want to resign and take the stump. The near future's bulging—or shall we say bristling?—with them. I can see them banked up on the horizon already like low-lying fog. It's a question of temperament partly, and I guess my taste is for the fastest game."

Seen in the mirror, he looked wistful, transfigured as one talking to himself who entertains a vision. Impatient as she was at his attitude without knowing exactly why, Mary caught his transcendent expression and his air of prophetic mastery. Towering above her in the frame, he brought back the day when she had heard him speak bareheaded from the automobile. Then of a sudden the speculation in his gaze died as a lamp goes out and grave concern took its place. With the solicitous, half-affrighted mien of one who dreads he knows not what, he bent over her shoulder to say:

"Do you prefer to have me take it, Mary? If my doing so would please you greatly, dear, because you're thoroughly convinced it's wiser for me, that's bound to weigh tremendously. I admit it's a debatable proposition. I told the governor I must consult my wife. As you say, it's a big honor, one that most men in my shoes would jump at. And with your help we should get on famously; it isn't a money question at all. It's your real opinion that I want."

Here was the same importunity only intensified which she had noticed ever since her return. His arm pressed her bare shoulder, his cheek touched hers caressingly. Yet she was strangely conscious that his fondness was forced. Now, that he had appealed to her sagacity and acknowledged there was no obstacle other than his own whim in the way of acceptance, she recognized her own unfitness to decide for him. Her first desire and first duty as a wife was to provide wise counsel and in this case she felt disqualified for the office. It would never do to let the glamour of becoming presently the larger earner of the two sway her unduly. On the other hand, of the law as a profession she was privately a little contemptuous, it was so cut and dried; and what better service could a man with the

proper qualifications render than devote his best years to clarifying it? His acceptance would suit her admirably; but if his own inclinations were adverse, was she sure enough to urge him in the teeth of what he had avowed with such a brow of fate? Up to this point she had always felt able to guide him, but now reluctantly she hesitated. She must not run the risk of ruining what he conceived to be his career. Out of fairness to him she must avoid dogmatism.

These swiftly alternating reflections consumed but a moment, then she said: "I should be very proud to see you a justice of the court of appeals. I should think you'd like to be. But in this purely professional matter I've not sufficient knowledge of the pros and cons to say 'do this' or 'do that.' The responsibility is too serious—for it involves the rest of your life, Ollie dear." Turning to look up in his face that he might divine that her perplexity was a compound of devotion and justice, she added: "What does Sybil say?"

The words slipped out automatically, as if the inquiry was most natural. Indeed it was not until Oliver's quick response: "Sybil? I haven't told her yet. You're the only one who knows," that Mary realized the inappropriateness. It was as though the issue had been what they should have for dinner. And yet she had spoken mechanically as meaning that Sybil was more in touch with his professional activities. Yet even this solace turned to gall as she bit her lip. The audible effect of the question lingered repugnantly, offending her ear and hence her pride, a consequence to which Oliver's nervous surprise had contributed. Why should he show confusion at her remark? Nevertheless she felt annoyed with herself at the slip.

"But you will tell her?" she persisted. "I wouldn't decide without asking several opinions."

To justify herself still further Mary brought up the subject of her own accord as soon as dinner was over, by bidding Oliver state his case. "He wants your un-biassed judgment, Sybil."

Short as was the actual time consumed in telling, it seemed an age, and all the while she studied the listener's face, seeking a clew to this semblance of mystery. That Sybil's interest was acute was plain. Not only her parted lips and almost tense stillness betrayed this, but the glint from her eyes when the full import of the proposal dawned on her. Yet Mary on the alert for the slightest sign derived no inkling of her thoughts which, obedient to instinctive artifice (pet weapon of abnegating femininity and inglorious as a lath), hedged themselves so successfully that the appeal, "Tell me, Mary, first what you think," had the effect of ingenuousness. It seemed tantamount to saying: "You know so much better than I."

Having vaguely expected contradiction and finding the path apparently clear, Mary felt free to answer: "It's difficult for me to decide absolutely because I'm neither a man nor a lawyer and Ollie has his doubts. But why isn't this of all positions the one he's best suited for and ought to like best? It's a great honor and there's no impediment in the way of his acceptance."

"Except that it would shelve him completely, Mary. Oh, can't you see that?"

It was as though having worn a mask, Sybil had suddenly let it fall. As by the wave of a wand her personality seemed metamorphosed. An eagerness which attested the release of pent-up feelings had replaced her habitual lack of assertion. She had become self-reliant, incisive, opinionated. Her plaint too was the very echo of Oliver's own plea, though they had not exchanged a word. In the face of the chameleon-like transforma-

tion Mary colored from bewilderment. Was this the pliable Sybil? And while she wondered she heard her demur afresh beseechingly, turning first to Oliver: "You won't accept, will you?" then back again to her: "We won't permit him, will we, Mary? It would be wicked to let him throw himself away." The pleading eyes were lustrous, and her hands were clasped in dismayed protest.

Unfamiliar as was the experience and though in a sense on her guard, Mary saw no reason to show umbrage at a frankness so impetuous that it already took even her own conversion for granted. Sybil's exuberance was no more open to suspicion than the eruption of a volcano supposed to be extinct. With this advantage that Sybil was a pupil of her own, not a volcano. At any other moment Mary would have rejoiced in this show of individuality. But the embarrassment (almost a smart) of the personal equation, which if she herself were not careful would put Oliver in the guise of being obliged to decide between them, prevented her at first from treating such unwonted fire with the indulgence it deserved. "You surely can not mean that by becoming a member of the highest court a lawyer throws himself away."

"I'm not thinking of others, but I'm certain Oliver would. Why, Mary, if he sticks where he is, he may become anything—President of the United States even. You must know that as well as I do."

In her quandary the impulse that predominated with Mary was to terminate the discussion as soon as possible. Could Sybil tell her anything concerning her husband she did not know? Though aware that Oliver's eyes had been riveted on Sybil's face during the outburst, half fascinated, half perturbed, and that like one tongue-tied in the presence of two rival disputants, he

had not uttered a word, the idea of treating the situation other than lightly seemed to her compatible neither with dignity nor sense of values. She felt that she was making clear her own recovered impartiality and that rivalry was preposterous by exclaiming: "When I spoke of unbiassed judgment, Sybil, I didn't realize you were so hypnotized by the election you were ready to jump out of your skin. You said I must know; yes, I do know, for I had the good fortune to hear Oliver toward the close of the campaign when he wasn't aware I was present. In Farragut Square, speaking from a motor. I never told him before—or you. I noticed how closely the crowd attended, how still they were, and how they shouted when he finished. I was carried away; I felt like shouting; so I fully understand." Mary paused for an aside to Oliver, which was meant to be endearing: "You see I keep my eye on you more constantly than you suspect." Then turning again to Sybil, she resumed: "I've a slight preference—Ollie is aware of it—not a positive opinion. But you, Sybil, by tragically imploring him to decline, have assumed a big responsibility, for it gives the appearance of manifest destiny to what Oliver himself has declared to be a debatable question." She paused an instant to let her words sink in, but she was bent on heading off a rejoinder and administering a final stroke before the tight curves of Sybil's mouth—would she ever look demure again?—which already announced only too plainly, "That's exactly what it is—destiny"—should do so aloud. "And if it comes to seeing, dear, it's obvious that Ollie shouldn't decide hastily. After all, it's he who has to decide; it's his question—a man's and not a woman's. He must think it over, consult his friends—Everett Dean and Ham—weigh the considerations carefully. If he does I shall be happy in either case."

Though confident that she had spiked Sybil's guns—whatever the extraordinary fusillade might signify—by convicting her of hysteria, Mary was pleased to be abetted by Oliver as she turned to him for support. She had hoped her disposition of the case would appeal to his common sense. He seemed to her distinctly relieved, and his comment: "That's right, I must think it over. It's my hunt in the end to accept or decline and I shan't decide to-night," was clearly an intimation that he did not care to discuss the matter further at the moment.

She did not look to see the effect of this on Sybil, but not a word more on the subject was said that night. Yet though they passed rather a cosey evening (she made Sybil fetch her tapestry while she herself read aloud), surprise lingered in Mary's mind. She had neutralized the effect of Sybil's extraordinary interference, but the source was still unexplained, confirming her impression that something was going on she did not understand. To Oliver's solicitude and constraint was added the perplexing evidence of Sybil completely out of character. Nor could Mary quell altogether the suspicion of guile; that under the cover of candor Sybil had been reading her a lecture.

Hence the resolve next morning to postpone no longer her programme of investigation. Laying aside everything else, Mary devoted the day to minute domestic scrutiny. Having made a preliminary tour of the house from attic to cellar and detecting no surface signs of slackness, for everything looked clean and regular, she took possession of the bills and account-books, and shut herself up with them. Some time had elapsed since she had given these other than casual examination. As a result of her growing confidence in Sybil's trustworthiness, her inspection had become more

and more perfunctory. Now she scanned every item; and presently her search was rewarded. Among the entries in the grocer's book she came upon a forbidden article of diet, and on the next page a second and a third. These precluded the theory of accident. She followed the clew with the eagerness of a hound, for if Sybil was breaking her regulations behind her back, everything—including Oliver's uneasiness—was explained.

As she read on, the proofs continued cumulatively damning. Occasional and trifling to begin with, the infractions grew more frequent and flagrant with each successive month until of late, when vigilance was lulled to sleep, the disobedience had become rampant. It was not the size of the bills—Mary had been aware that their expenses were somewhat larger than formerly and had credited the increase to the influence of a bigger joint income; the offense which stood out, combining deceit with insubordination, was that Sybil, while following every rule punctiliously when under observation, had taken deliberate advantage of all her absences to introduce everything tabooed in the way of foods. The accounts revealed this conclusively. For the discipline which had become a cheerful habit to Oliver and the children, a reactionary and self-indulgent régime had been substituted. What was true of the grocer's book proved to be true of the butcher's and every other tradesman's. There was not a bill which failed to disclose perfidious infringements of the law of the household.

Mary was too angry to attempt at the moment to analyze her feelings. Face to face with failure for the first time in her life, her immediate desire was to ascertain the worst. The bills were an indictment in themselves, but she was eager to know the full extent of the treachery. There must be further evidence below the surface. She was on the war-path now and she

would leave no corner uninspected. Guided by this, she made a second tour of the house, seeking with the eyes of a lynx for additional violations of her domestic code. She opened drawers and pried into the contents of closets. She did not know what she expected to find, but was intent on being thorough.

Her quest proved unavailing until stepping from the spotless kitchen into the yard she reached the spot where the iron barrels that held the refuse of the house stood. Raising the cover of the nearest, she peered within. It was full to the brim with an accumulation of ashes supporting tin cans and other débris. But on the surface in full sight lay some shining objects at which she stared with mingled consternation and triumph. They were corks—but champagne corks—unmistakable because of their shape, and six in number. She picked one from the pile and examined it; the favorite brand stamped on the side spelled absolute conviction.

So this was what they had been doing in her absence; they—for Oliver must have been privy to the treachery. The surprise-party had been glossed over because it was an orgy; they had been ashamed to tell her; they had even kept the iniquity out of the bills, and but for this chance discovery she would never have known. They? Mary fiercely put away the plural charge. Oliver had connived at her violations, permitted them no doubt; but he was not the one chiefly to blame. The scheme plainly was Sybil's—little purring cat. Out of sheer vanity—in order to please—by crafty catering to his easy-going susceptibilities she had cajoled him and undermined her wifely authority. Oh, it was detestable! And what ingratitude for all her friendship. But she had found her out, and just in time. No wonder that Oliver wore a furtive, troubled look and seemed so glad to have her back.

Sybil must go; her usefulness was at an end. So much was clear. But though she longed to thrust these tokens in her face and say: "What does this mean?" Mary was already asking herself if it would not be wiser to avoid a scene. Plenty of excuses could be found for getting Sybil out of the house; and the fittest punishment—if vengeance in the case of such a minx was compatible with self-respect—might be to drop a word in Henry Thornton's ear. Incensed and also cast down by this sorry finish to what had seemed an ideal arrangement, Mary collected the telltale evidence from the ash-barrel and pensively went up-stairs.

CHAPTER XVIII

HAVING slept on her wrongs, Mary decided to abstain from taking Sybil to task immediately. She felt irate, disappointed, and, in a sense humiliated by her discoveries, but after all was not her judgment rather than her system impugned? She had engaged Sybil with her eyes open, aware of her defects, especially her insatiate love of pleasure, but hoping that the opportunity to earn a livelihood in such agreeable surroundings and serious responsibility would keep her straight. They had sufficed for a brief period, and then she had broken down; yielded to temptation, partly so as to curry favor with Oliver by surreptitious lapses from the rules set for her, and partly because regularity was boring. One thing had led to another until she had gone to pieces—become a devotee of underhand, insubordinate acts which catered to her own vanity. Here was the chronic disobedience reduced to terms; the case was simply this—that out of pity for her friend's necessities she had credited Sybil with greater powers of resistance than she possessed. What was there to do but terminate the stewardship at the earliest moment and engage a successor of sterner mould?

Mary decided also to wait until the hour of dismissal before letting Sybil know she had found her out. In the meanwhile she would observe her clandestinely. The mischief was already done. With her looking on, the further contamination to either the children or Oliver would be negligible. The culprit had enjoyed a

long inning; now she would have hers, and the espionage should determine her course regarding Henry Thornton. For, though indignant, Mary wished to be just. There was such a thing as asking more of a woman than she could give. After all, Sybil had never pretended to belong to other than the old school. To insure the success of her domestic experiment she ought properly to have enlisted the co-operation of some one with attributes and sympathies resembling her own—some one in the van and keen to idealize the position rather than satisfied with the old-fashioned régime.

Consequently, having taken the risk, Mary felt she must beware of malice. Sybil's chances of matrimony were diminishing every day in spite of her new method of doing her hair. Assuming that nothing more flagrant appeared than the peccadilloes disclosed, she owed it to her perhaps to let Henry Thornton decide for himself. Having been his first choice, if now he fancied Sybil, she could not with good grace disparage her without more provocation. The world was still full of men who succumbed to women of that type—sweet, clinging, and vain. Indeed if he were seriously enamoured of Sybil and desired her as a wife, the time had arrived when it would be to the advantage of all that he should take her.

But though Mary succeeded in regarding the matter less tragically than at first by charging the catastrophe solely to the account of her wish to provide Sybil employment, she could not escape the unpleasant reminder that her paradise had been invaded. It was abhorrent as well as mortifying that there should be a serpent in the garden where she had believed that nothing noxious dwelt. All else became overshadowed by a vigilance which throve on the possibility of further discoveries. Not that she expected to discover much; but until

Sybil was actually out of the house genuine peace of mind would be impossible. So it happened that Oliver's refusal of the judgeship, announced forty-eight hours after their discussion, gave her a twinge for the reason that she had thwarted Sybil in vain. Not that she cared materially which way he decided; but for the first time the ugly question had obtruded itself—could there possibly be anything between Sybil and Oliver?

Mary spurned the suggestion indignantly as unworthy of her and unfair to Oliver. Granting Sybil's wiles, was it conceivable that one whom she trusted so implicitly and of whose devotion she was so absolutely sure could even have tottered on the pedestal where she had placed him? The thought was too incredible for serious consideration. Nevertheless, as she lay in wait for Sybil day after day, she detected herself observing her husband also. But to no purpose, as was reassuringly patent after a fortnight had passed. Sybil's conduct of the household affairs was exemplary; so far as appearances went, butter would not melt in her mouth. As for Oliver, he still wore his puzzling air of constraint, but he seemed so anxious to please that suspicion (if it merited so harsh a word) was eradicated by a return to the theory that he was contrite—ashamed of himself for his part in the insubordination. He even took occasion to explain again with care why he had refused the governor's offer, giving reasons which reduced Sybil's influence to a minimum because they were so obviously genuine.

The time came rather sooner than Mary had expected when she was forced to choose between impairment to her business and absence from home. Now that the stratagem of giving Sybil a free hand had revealed nothing, the obvious deduction was that the mice were waiting for the cat's departure. An acquaintance of

Mrs. Clifford Palmer's who lived some fifty miles from Benham sent for her. To decline the summons would mean the loss of an important commission. Why should she refuse? Such mischief as was possible had been done, and unpleasant as was the foreknowledge that discipline would be relaxed the moment her back was turned, the repetition did not really matter. As soon as she could find the right successor or Henry Thornton took the final plunge, the household would be purged. Until then she must possess her soul in bitter silence and wait. To allow the indignity to ruffle her to such a degree that her business interests suffered would be to give it a fictitious value, especially as Oliver's demeanor during the last three weeks suggested the possibility that his contrition would develop into backbone. The most satisfactory revenge of all would be the return of the wanderer to his true allegiance. If of his own accord he were to protest at the infractions, then indeed Sybil's game would be spoiled.

Therefore, though she set forth reluctantly under the circumstances, Mary went without qualms. The date of her return was left uncertain; she would send word. Indeed she departed in good spirits, buoyed up by the theory of Oliver's possible repentance and glad to be busy again. During the interval at home her professional imagination had been so hampered by this domestic crisis that it would not work. Now, having escaped at the call of opportunity, she would try to forget the existence of the serpent so soon to be expelled from her orderly garden.

In view of her invoked serenity, this was not difficult. The new client proved to be ambitious, opulent, and submissive; in need of an adviser to tell her what to do; and her attitude could be summed up in the pleasant order: "Something distinctive—but I leave it all to you."

Mary was exultant. She did not like to be tied down by ways and means. She delighted in scope and at the same time prided herself on keeping the architectural "extras" within such bounds that her masculine competitors must own she got the better of them in the end. It had become a favorite formula of hers to volunteer: "They say men are so honest. Now, I own there will be extras. An architect can't avoid them. But mine never cost more than you expect."

On this occasion it was speedily arranged that she was to undertake both the house and the landscape-gardening. Her task was another instance of transforming a rustic domain into stateliness. Mary became absorbed in a scheme to combine the merits of the Walworth and Thornton properties with a novelty of treatment that should win her new laurels. A week's stay was desirable for preliminary study; she could plan better on the spot; and the cordiality of her hostess encouraged this. She wrote home that they were not to expect her at present. This was on the third day, and on the fourth one of the children of the hostess awoke with an ailment which the doctor declared to be scarlet fever.

Mary took her departure with the promptness which the emergency called for. It was her intention before starting to apprise Oliver by telegram from the station, but in the flurry of catching the train this was overlooked. Asking the porter for a blank, she prepared a message to be despatched at the next stop. With the message on her lap the thought came, Why not surprise them? The suggestion, whimsical in its origin, was eagerly embraced. This was exactly what she would do—descend on them unawares. Mary wondered that it had never occurred to her before. If their behavior bore scrutiny, so much the better; if not, they had only themselves to

blame. Surely a wife was entitled to return to her own fireside at any hour without giving warning.

Mary tore the telegraph blank into little pieces and crumpled them in her hand. As she clinched it she realized that her heart was beating faster than usual and that she was looking forward with almost fierce eagerness to the result of the tactics she had decided to pursue. When she stole into the house what would she find them doing? She drew no picture, she did not attempt to forestall; the tenseness of her nerves was due not to dread but to avid curiosity. She had a right to know what was going on, and this was the method by which she might be able to inform herself.

She had arrived alone at night at other times occasionally, but the lack of any one to meet her as she alighted from the train gave her a strange sensation. What would Oliver think? Would she not be branded as a spy in her own eyes, in any event? And she was surely pursuing a phantom—a will-o'-the-wisp of her own imagination. But what if it should not prove so? To surprise Sybil in some transgression would be retribution sweet as well as fitting; but if Oliver were involved in the guilt—it was too impossible, too terrible for conjecture. Her life would be ruined; her happiness forever at an end.

From the distressing tumult of such thoughts, the swiftness of a taxicab came as a relief. Yet Mary leaned back in it with the nervous expectancy of one who whirls deliberately toward her fate. The hour was close to ten o'clock. Her passage lay through a section of the city where the thoroughfares were still ablaze with light. The streets were thronged, and the sights and sounds of a heterogeneous populace reached her as she swept by. Each return to Benham gave her a more vivid impression of the city's growth and of the swell-

ing human tide—beings all occupied like herself with the engrossing problem of how to make the most of life. She was a unit in a typical American city seething with social enterprise and eager at heart, however clumsy its expression, to reinterpret in terms of enlightened democracy every human relation. A unit, but one upon whom destiny had conferred the special privilege of lighting a lamp to serve as a guide for a new world of lovers. So it had seemed until yesterday. Now, in conjunction with the grim reproach of tracking her husband like the veriest heroine of the divorce court, the flame had dwindled to a ghastly interrogation-point veiled by murky smoke. Here in the moment of victory she was on the same miserable errand from which she had hoped to help deliver forevermore the wise spirits of her sex.

The bustle of the thoroughfares was succeeded by the stillness of the residential quarter. She was swiftly nearing her destination. She seemed to discern in the familiar landmarks so many mute witnesses of her secret return. In another few moments she had reached a point where every lamp-post and doorway were known to her. The sheen from innumerable window-shades telling of other firesides seemed to signal: "There she goes!" How impassive those silent rows of houses and yet how vibrant with the interplay of human perplexities! As the façade of the apartment-house which she had designed for Mr. Mitchell loomed through the window, she could not resist a fond glance. Its effect was unimportant and commonplace now, but it had given her her start. She had been making progress ever since until this trying hour. In another instant they would be at home. She started as the honk of the horn gave warning to a passer-by, and she was conscious of the fear lest her approach had been betrayed. She

would have liked to tell the chauffeur to muffle every sound and steal up to the door.

Mary had her fare and pass-key ready. To alight, mount the steps, slip into the vestibule and noiselessly turn the lock of the inner door took but a few seconds. She had given her trunk to the transfer company so as to enter unobserved. Closing the door, she set her bag down in the hall and waited. Everything was still; no one had been warned of her arrival. She saw at a glance that the den was dark and unoccupied and the curtains of the parlor drawn. As she listened with an intentness which made audible the agitation of her own heart, the faint sound of voices reached her. They were there then, and together. For an instant she hesitated, repelled by the hateful degradation of becoming an eavesdropper. She had but to call and her ambuscade would be turned into a surprise. If so, she would learn nothing and her perplexity remain unsolved. No; now was the chance to find out, and to change her mind would be weakness.

Stealing on tiptoe through the hall, Mary could tell as she approached the portière that those within were deeply engrossed by their conversation. Though she could not distinguish the words, she now distinctly recognized the voices and gathered from the tone of each that it was no ordinary dialogue. The portière was closely drawn. Even with her face against it she could not detect the import of their words. But of a sudden, as she waited, the tense murmur of Oliver's speech was attended by movement, as though he had made a bound and was struggling with some one. There was a noise suggestive of confusion and scuffling feet followed by a woman's groan. The voice was Sybil's.

In the act of listening, Mary pulled aside the curtain. Through the aperture she could see everything without

being seen. They were at the opposite side of the room. Dishevelled and aghast, Sybil was standing on the farther side of a table her hands covering her eyes. She removed them on the instant to murmur: "It's my fault—it's my fault, Ollie. I should have realized this might happen. It's madness for us both, as I've just told you, for neither of us is free." On the edge of a chair into which he had evidently just dropped, staring at the carpet with his forehead between his clinched fists, like one foiled and at bay, but resolutely impassioned still, sat Oliver.

What she had just missed seeing was clear as crystal to Mary. Oliver had doubtless sprung upon Sybil and embraced her with a lover's ardor; she had escaped and sought sanctuary behind the table. Were not the disarray of her hair and dainty evening raiment telltale indications of the genuineness of his infidelity?

As beset by crushing horror, distress, and indignation, Mary confronted the truth, she saw her husband start from his chair in response to Sybil's plea and stride forward like a wilful giant, exclaiming: "I will not let you go. You have brought me happiness; revealed to me what happiness really is. Free? If we both care—that sets us free."

It was plain that save for the protecting table he would have reinforced his glowing words by a fresh attempt to take her in his arms. On Sybil's face, which was turned toward her, Mary discerned the play of contending emotions; that being secure, she could afford half to confess; prudent, must shut the door partly in his face; coy, would dally with him as a cat with a mouse before she succumbed; and to make sure of her ascendancy, must head him off yet lead him on. Then she heard her reply, definitely yet with a tragic cadence that impugned fate by its semblance to amorous vacillation: "I've given my word; I'm bound."

What did she mean by the averment? Mary could bear no more. She had seen enough; Oliver was in love with Sybil and she with him, and the temple of her wifely happiness and her trust was rent asunder. She advanced into the room, flinging an outraged, disdainful, scorching glance at each in turn. Palsied by her sudden descent upon them, Oliver recoiled, seeing a ghost. "Mary!" he ejaculated, and as the reality of her presence flashed upon him he stood stricken mute by consternation. But Sybil, though she seemed for an instant about to collapse, was quick to rally and indulge the hope of strategy in the face of disaster.

"Why, Mary, are you back?" she said all smiles and she started forward.

Mary's answer was a brow of withering scorn. She looked alternately from the one to the other in awful silence, then she singled Sybil out.

"Leave my house at once!" she cried. But the banality of the command dawned on her instantly and she added in the next breath: "No, your place is here. It is for me to go."

With that she turned toward Oliver. "You are free—absolutely free."

He was standing rooted to the spot where she had surprised him. Humiliation, anguish, and despair were mirrored in his eyes, yet they looked dogged too. It seemed as though, having been convicted of what was tantamount to adultery, he was trying to reason out if he was contrite. His words were: "You have come back at the wrong moment, Mary. We've blown up; but you've seen all there was to see."

It was a lame excuse and only half ingenuous. He was a guilty cur; no dodging that. And yet—it had happened. My God! how terrible it was. And what was to be the outcome? Such were his agonizing

thoughts, but he felt tongue-tied. When he broke his trance, it was to reach to the mantelpiece and light a cigarette. The action was purely nervous, a mechanical antidote to overwhelming wretchedness.

But to Mary's eyes it was arrant bravado, igniting her ire. "At least respect my presence so long as I remain in the house by not smoking in my room," she threw at him as he stood before the fireplace with legs apart, a woeful giant paralyzed by self-reproach.

Oliver crimsoned at a rebuke so alien to the true cause. Dropping the cigarette on the hearth as if it burned him, he extinguished it with his foot. Was this his once idolized Mary? But what could he expect? She had caught him in the act of embracing her own bosom friend. His perfidy had cut her to the heart. No wonder she was beside herself. Instead of falling on his knees and imploring forgiveness, he was smoking in her face. Yet with Sybil in the room what could he say? Or what was there to say? He might profess—but Mary had heard and seen him. Was anything clear except that he was in a hideous entanglement from which there seemed no release?

He must have time to think—this was his immediate need. Instinctively he grasped at the straw which Mary's protest offered, and chose to regard her injunction as dismissal. A smoke was what he needed, and there was the den. Let the women adjust the trouble, if they could. He was no coward—but perhaps with him away they would be able somehow to work it out. Betwixt remorse and doubt, he felt that if he remained his head would burst.

With a piteous look at Mary, whose bitterness had not blinded him to the agony which lay beneath, Oliver left the room. Sybil was the first to break silence.

"It is not his fault."

"Yours chiefly; I'm well aware of that. But I saw and heard you both. When a pitcher is broken beyond repair, what matters who took it to the well?"

"It's not so bad as that, Mary. You are the one he really cares for. That's my only defense."

Mary made a gesture of disdain. "There are two to reckon with on that score. My love is dead. It perished utterly at the moment when from behind that curtain I saw him look at you. Broken-hearted? Yes, I'm that. His adoration of me, and mine of him meant life. Make the most of this and of my misery. Why did you do it, Sybil?"

"I've tried not to."

"And could not refrain. Oh yes, I know. I trusted you as my friend—my friend whom I was seeking to help—but you've made me and him—yes him—the victims of your besetting sin, your petty vanity."

"You have no besetting sin, Mary, so you are not the best of judges. Let me tell you this for your comfort——"

"There can be no comfort. If it were worth while to discuss this further, I've proofs that you lured him on. Oh, but it's futile. We're two twentieth-century women, not two furies. I could strangle you or tear your eyes out, Sybil, if it would bring back what was. But that's gone. The only thing to think of now is what to do. I give him up. I've told you that already. He's yours." Sinking upon the sofa, Mary buried her face in her hands. In another moment she felt the tears trickling through. Her shallow rival might see her weep for all she cared. It would show her what it meant to have a heart.

"But that's impossible. You don't know the facts. You may believe I did try when I tell you that I'm engaged. I've promised to marry Henry Thornton."

Mary sat up electrified by incredulity. "You are mad, Sybil."

"We've been engaged nearly a week. I was waiting for you to come home in order to announce it." She spoke as one who seeks to soothe by bland explicitness.

"Oh, but it's monstrous! And you love my husband!"

Sybil hesitated a fraction of a second. "That's a big word, Mary. I'm not sure. I could have loved him certainly. But that's finished and he knows."

"Knows what?"

"That I'm engaged."

"And yet he had you in his arms within these five minutes. Are you mad? You will marry one man with the kisses of another wet upon your lips?"

"I like and respect Henry Thornton. We have similar tastes. He worships me and will give me the things I care for most. And the best reason of all, if you would only see it, is that it terminates the risk. I shall belong to some one else. When I realized how matters were drifting here, I tried to be loyal to you before it was too late."

"Loyal? Oh, God! And now?"

"It would have been all right, Mary, if you hadn't spied on us. I should have married Henry, and Ollie would have returned to you. And that is what will happen now if only——"

"If only I consent to palliate this further vile deceit. Grant that you were only weak and vain before, Sybil—now you're wicked. It will be my duty to prevent this at all events by warning Henry."

"What will you tell him pray? That your husband made love to me in your drawing-room and that I had to flee behind the sofa? Whose story will he believe? I was not his first choice, Mary; I'm well aware of that.

But priority doesn't endow you with the right to choose for him. You interfered once in my love affairs, remember, and I tried to seem grateful. But once is enough, thank you."

Mary, wincing at the ungracious allusion to the past, could scarcely credit her senses. These false morals so spitefully phrased in a minor key dulled temporarily her chief sorrow. It seemed that this self-effacing pussycat was prepared to fight if thwarted; had claws if not teeth. The question which she asked aloud: "To whom have I been giving shelter all these months?" was a soliloquy eloquent of fresh abhorrence and dismay.

"A very unreliable person. You knew that when you engaged me."

The reply followed so promptly that it partook of accusation, which required to be met. "You did your work extremely well at first. I had no complaints to make."

"I realized so and was gratified. But I was not proof against the rest. You expected too much of me."

"Too much? That my intimate friend should keep her hands off my husband?"

"As stated by you, it sounds detestable. Oh yes, I led him on. Why did I do it?—that's what you asked a moment ago. Maybe you won't believe it, but I'm interested in finding out almost as much as you." Sybil paused as if to measure her words: "I was to blame of course; but the fault wasn't entirely mine!"

"I'm not excusing Oliver. Let's take that for granted and—leave him out."

"I had no intention of dragging him in. He scarcely counts at all; in that way I mean. The fault wasn't his."

"Whose, then?"

"Yours, Mary."

Here was some subtlety that was akin to insolence. Mary frowned. "What had I to do with it?"

"Everything. It wouldn't—I don't say couldn't—have happened otherwise. After all that has occurred it sounds presumptuous and—rather nasty of me to say so."

The admission was so far disarming that Mary felt ready to listen. Though sceptical of Sybil's ability to alter the situation by a hair through her logic, she was slightly curious. "Go on."

Sybil reflected an instant. "You threw him in my way to begin with and left him there unprotected."

Though the charge grated on Mary's ear as a specious distortion of the harmless truth, she was moved to lodge a protest forthwith. "I left my husband where he belonged, but in your charge. He had his manhood and his conscience to protect him." She added in an access of despair: "At least I thought he had." How annoying it was to feel again upon the verge of tears at a moment when she had need of all her wits. She was obliged to use her handkerchief.

Sybil observed her demurely while she wiped her eyes. "You've forestalled by your last remark half of what I was going to say."

"I don't understand you."

"Simply this. You named my shortcomings just now. I owned to them. You've no besetting sin, but, aware of mine, surely it was indiscreet to run a risk. In exposing him you didn't make allowances for the old Adam in man and—the Eve in woman."

Though Sybil dropped her eyes in deprecation of the evil she extenuated, Mary protested on the spot.

"Now you're coarse. The answer is that I believed Oliver above it. You're condoning the sort of wickedness we women have pledged ourselves to extirpate."

"Not condoning. How could I condone anything in a period when every unmarried woman is encouraged to know so much of evil that, if a man pays court to her, she stops to wonder if he's spotted. I learned my lesson once, you know. But don't you see? I thought he was above it, too. And then the old Eve broke out in me. 'Her husband is immune' I said—so I was tempted."

"You set to work deliberately?" gasped Mary.

"Oh, hardly that. I tried to please him. My vanity, you told me. Something at any rate—a part of what I am—egged me on. I liked to do things for him, he was such a splendid fellow, so manly, big, and strong, and then so able." Sybil still standing by the table caressed the silken fringes of the cloth, then looked up appealingly: "I'm trying to ascertain for all our sakes just how it happened. It wasn't then so very long before—shall I go on? You may not like this, Mary. Yet we're talking it out, aren't we, once for all?"

What was the use? As if the process was not manifest. Mary recognized, too, the ostrichlike purpose to shoulder all the blame, and by shielding Oliver, to restore the pitcher mended. Nevertheless, strange as it was to be bandying reasons at an hour when no reason could be better than another, she nodded. There was something in the tone too which kept her curious.

The tolerated mentor dropped her eyes again and toying with the fringes, added: "Having him so much to myself, I grew sorry for him. Piece that to what I've said already, there's the whole story, isn't it? The only happy chance is——"

But Mary would not let her finish. Sybil could philosophize if she chose after explaining her extraordinary allegation. "And why sorry?"

"Because he was so starved."

"Starved? Starved by whom?"

"By you, Mary. He had enough to eat. Another kind of starving. I've longed to tell you this before, but never dared. Later perhaps I didn't choose to. Now I must. It may make all the difference."

"I do not understand you even now"—and Mary spoke the truth—"You mean—" Faltering she paused.

"Exactly; you didn't really love him. That sounds effrontery; but don't box my ears until I've a chance to add you weren't aware of it. You thought you idolized him—yes, I know."

"You evil-minded girl!" Mary in a blaze of fury started from her seat and towered quivering. For a moment she thought of doing just what her quondam handmaiden had invited, who now appeared a fiend incarnate, not even timid, and who sat there on the sofa in her evening finery, a gleaming, fluffy epitome of soft mannerisms, yet obdurate to the point of courage, for her look said plainly: "I'd die sooner than budge in my opinion. Now you know it." Sybil her critic! The negligible Sybil really thought this! But Mary stayed her hand only to flame: "Wasn't it enough to wreck my life and home without telling me to my face that I don't love my husband? You who know that until you darkened this house there wasn't a couple in Benham—I might even say the world—whose relations were more ideal. Loved him? I loved Oliver from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet until you angled for him. Up to the time you came, wasn't he one of the happiest men alive?"

But Sybil, though she winced, showed the white of her eye ominously as she answered:

"He thought he was, and that was the main trouble."

Here was a new edition of the selfsame charge and equally atrocious. Mary, who had spoken with all her

soul in repulse of the baseless venomous slander, vacillated between the desire to close her ears and the astonishment—akin to fascination—of being analyzed so ruthlessly by one whose deductions she had been wont to think primitive. Was there ever such a tissue of cruel absurdities? And yet she was moved to ask defiantly: "How did I ever show I did not love him. Name a single thing."

An odd light shone in Sybil's eyes. She rose, evidently on the eve of going to pack her things. But believing she had said more than enough already—the truth of which could be better tested after she was gone—she found herself in the position of one, who having dared, is met with a demand for more. Why should she miss such an opportunity—one she could not hope to have again? Nevertheless her first impulse was to proffer justification. "If what I've said is so, it lets me out a little, and him also. I'm not left quite such a viper, though you're bound to think me one just now. It explains a little how it happened."

"Yet you avoid answering my question."

"Oh, not if you insist." Sybil paused a moment. It was now or never and her own faults had been dwelt on. "I'll tell you one thing to begin with. You've never realized—you don't half now—how great a prize he is. The sort of man any woman should thank her lucky stars for and cling to with a vise-like grip. But you were so absorbed by your own doings and your own ambitions, you failed to appreciate him. According to my lights you've virtually neglected him; gone your own way and called your standards his by making him believe he liked them. You deemed him your inferior, and that made you blind to his big qualities. Oh, I see you're itching already to term that my delusion based on the scheme of life which permits a woman to be a

door-mat for men to wipe their feet on. Yes, I admit I was brought up to wait on men and live day after day the victim of their humors. The quid pro quo—having all one's bills paid in exchange for petty bullying—has suited me, and so far I've got off scot-free. That's an ignoble view I ought to be ashamed of very likely. You'd say and rightly that the time has come when every self-respecting woman should refuse to knuckle down to any man. There's just one flaw in that; I see it best because I'm such a coward. If I loved a man with all my heart and soul—and won't some women always be so weak?—I'd be afraid he would escape and some one else would grab him. Men are so scarce there aren't enough of good ones—indeed of any kind—to go round. That's always been the trouble and so——”

“You grabbed him. That's all I've claimed. You're welcome to him, Sybil. If a man's like that, the modern woman washes her hands of him; lets the other woman have him!”

“I wonder,” said Sybil softly. “Not grabbed him, Mary. I didn't have to reach for him. He would have fallen into my lap like a ripe apple, if I hadn't dodged. And there's the weak spot in your system. You ridiculed his friends, you scorned his tastes, ignored his politics (his soul's vision) all in the name of your superior wisdom, and—like a man—he turned to me for consolation. I'm saying this pointblank because you begged me to. This doesn't mean I don't realize all you've accomplished. There's no one who admires more—unless it's he—your exceptional cleverness and wisdom. Compared with you, I'm merely—what shall I say?—a vapid creature. And yet not evil-minded. You won't agree to that—you think I'm wicked still.” (For Mary with tense lips and disbelieving eyes stood speechless like a brooding statue.)

"Oh, very well. This gives me license to add one thing else, I tried to tell you earlier. It's very lucky, in view of what has happened, I'd a grain of conscience left—that I didn't fall over head and ears in love with him. In that case, Mary—" She stopped deliberately, but for a perceptible instant her bosom heaved and her eyes kindled with a wistful amorous look that dallied with regret.

"The situation would have been very different—is what you mean. I fail to see how that could make the slightest difference to me." Save for the sound of the disclaiming words, Mary might have been a statue still.

Sybil shook her head. "You will some day. At least—you must not tempt me, Mary. I haven't said that I was positive. The only certainty is that I'm running away." Then, with a look around her of one who awakens to reality, she asked: "Shall I incommode you if I leave to-night?"

"Only that Oliver will be left alone. I go myself immediately."

Prepared neither for the irony nor the determination, Sybil looked dismayed. She had tried hard to mend matters only to be repulsed. "It will be best perhaps he should be," she responded and left the room.

Was this a Parthian shaft? The Delphic quality was not lost on Mary despite the sincerity of her unconcern. Was her rival seeking to take back in parting that which she had pretended to bestow? As if it mattered whether penitence or unlawful passion prevailed when Oliver was alone and face to face with the consequences. Though she had listened to every word, Sybil's charges had produced no more impression on her than waves upon a lighthouse. They had dazed her at the moment because of their daring, paralyzing her powers of speech; but she viewed them as so many specious efforts to

gloss over the irremediable. From the chaos of her happiness and the depths of her despair the single crucial fact—that her husband had been false to her—stood out with a grim definiteness that obscured aught else. There was no escape from it; she had seen with her own eyes, caught him in the act. The keystone of their wedlock—fidelity of wife to husband and husband to wife in thought and act—had broken apart through his weakness and lust, burying her in the ruins. What alternative was there for her, still alive and sentient, but to leave him and at once?

Firm in her determination that she could not endure to pass another night under the same roof, Mary hastened up-stairs. The result of remaining could only be colloquy and there was nothing to say. So far as argument could affect the case, the affair was at an end, for Oliver could not deny making love to Sybil. With this staring them both in the face, nothing remained but to arrange the details of living apart. She did not wish to talk with or see him again. A letter in the morning after she had time to reflect would settle everything.

There would be very little to settle—the only serious question being the children. She would insist on having them both of course, for he was the guilty party. Mary knew enough of the legal side of marital infelicities to feel confident of her rights. She would have liked to take them away with her at once, but it would hardly do to drag them from their beds. Bending over their pillows, she kissed them in turn, and a hot tear falling caused Christabel to open her eyes and ask: “What’s the matter, Mamma?”

Evading the inquiry by a soothing answer, she put out the light and stole softly away. They were involved in the misery also; she could not save them from it. But she would work her fingers off and eyes out in their

behalf. "Not a cent from him, not a cent," she kept saying to herself as she packed her belongings. She would be beholden to him for nothing for her support or theirs. Her professional income would be ample for both. Here was at least a grain of solace. She was not at his mercy—not obliged to accept his dole like so many of her unhappy predecessors.

To think that she of all women should be in this plight! Mary could not understand it—except that it had happened. Since Oliver had proved false, why this should include all men. The welling tears blinded her eyes as she made her preparations for departure. How she had adored him! If Sybil's wicked taunt: "You did not love your husband," needed refutation, the proof lay in her aching heart. But from this hour she would learn to cease to care. "Man's love is of his life a thing apart, 'tis woman's whole existence,"—the day had come when the fatality of that threadbare saw which had doomed so many of her own sex to prolonged misery could be set at naught. Henceforth her so-called husband should have no place in her life.

The sound of Sybil's footsteps on her way downstairs broke in upon Mary's preparations. Listening, she heard her descend, pass through the hall to the front door, and drive away without a word to Oliver, who made no effort to detain her—did not even show himself. Presumably he was still closeted in the "den," overwhelmed and dazed by the havoc he had wrought. Well he might be. Here in this twentieth century of democratic hope and idealism Nemesis still stalked as in the old Greek tragedy. His sin had found him out; and seemingly his paramour would persist in her evil purpose to marry Henry Thornton.

Her packing completed, Mary telephoned for a cab. She planned to steal away expeditiously and avert a

scene. There was only one available refuge—Barbara's. From the first moment she had decided to go there. Barbara and Ham would be mystified, but it would not be necessary to explain before morning. Alas! she had no family circle where she could hide her head. Her only sister was far away. Although her love was killed, the shame would rankle, and she must endure the bitter mortification of acknowledging her marriage to be a failure. But Barbara and Ham would give her shelter and sympathy. They at least would understand.

She could make them see that the tragedy was in no sense her fault, or the fault of her system. When, having glided down the stairs and made her exit without molestation, Mary was safe in the vehicle, this eagerness to be vindicated suddenly gripped her. The hateful conversation, which she had banished, repeated itself with all its details in her weary mind with the iteration of a flashing electric sign. Her cherished methods to blame for what had happened? Oliver starved and not appreciated? Neglected and tempted by her self-absorption? Above all, her capacity for loving deeply and ardently denied? The last was monstrous and its impossibility disproved the rest. Because men fail to control their carnal passions must a woman who has trusted be adjudged heartless? Clinching her finger-nails into her palms, Mary reviewed the past searchingly as the cab bore her away from what had yesterday seemed a model of a happy fireside. "No," she said aloud and the tears welled afresh, "if I could begin again, there is nothing I would alter." Then as the cab halted, the light from the Fords' library streamed down upon her. Her friends had not gone to bed; and under their roof she could feel sure of moral support.

CHAPTER XIX

It is the personal equation in life which so often confounds us by setting our theories at naught. Such was the effect on the Fords of Mary's disclosures. She managed to gloss over her predicament until morning by a lame excuse which aroused surprise without awakening suspicion. But after breakfast she made the announcement in the presence of them both that she had left Oliver. By stating briefly how she had discovered him the evening before in the very act of embracing Sybil, she felt she had laid an absolutely solid foundation for her unwillingness to remain another hour under the same roof. When she added that a night's sleepless vigil had made clearer than ever that her married life was over and that there was nothing left to consider except the details of separation, she believed she had disposed of the case. She did not choose to soil her lips by an allusion to Sybil's engagement, which by the morning light seemed more abhorrently grotesque than ever.

In addressing herself to both the Fords she acted advisedly. By his magnanimously far-sighted attitude, Ham had not merely long ago rehabilitated himself in her eyes, but had become a friend. Barbara's genius, a superb asset, had not however in its activities concerned itself with modern issues; to be sure, she had broken with convention in order to utilize it, but her loyal sympathy was to be counted on in this emergency rather than her capacity for thorough appreciation. At

the moment Ham, in spite of his limitations, seemed to Mary the more enlightened spirit from the point of view of her own necessities. With Sybil's reproaches still ringing in her ears, though she had banished them as a baseless effront, she somehow craved the moral sympathy of an impartial man. Let Ham, who knew all the facts, justify Oliver or condemn her if he would, and she would turn the microscope again upon her own conduct. She felt sure he would not; and as an offset to crude aspersion the support of one of the opposite sex seemed even more essential than feminine approval.

The first effect of her announcement on each was completely numbing—that of a tremendous shock for which neither was prepared by the slightest premonition. As Barbara declared when later on she became articulate, the thought that their relations were not ideally happy had never suggested itself; she and Ham had been wont to picture the Randalls as setting an inspiring example of matrimonial reciprocity. But at the outset they sat embarrassed and aghast. Ham's eyes were on his plate. Barbara, her cheeks flushed, looked at her with a deeply distressed air. Barbara was the first to endeavor to bridge over the gaps in the situation by pertinent inquiries. Had the disaster come out of a clear sky, or had her suspicions been aroused? Surely she must have exaggerated the circumstances? Even if Sybil was sufficiently base to connive, Oliver's share could only be involuntary?

"You seem to forget, dear, that I have seen with my own eyes. His behavior was beyond the shadow of a doubt. As to who was most to blame—why really, as I told them, that is immaterial with respect to the future. It is perfectly clear that I can't continue to live with Oliver."

"I suppose not," answered Barbara with a sigh. "It

seems incredible though that he—I know he worshipped the ground you trod on.”

Mary bit her lip. “I had believed so until yesterday. I had noticed since my return from New York there was something amiss. The demeanor of both seemed strained. But the actual truth came like a thunderbolt.”

“They took advantage of your absence; got involved behind your back before they realized it—that’s how it must have happened.” The speech was Ham’s, who looked straight at her for the first time. “Good Lord, if any one except you had told me, I would have nailed it as a lie. Even now you could knock me over with a feather. Why, Ollie’s the salt of the earth. This only proves, I suppose, that where women are concerned one can’t be cock-sure of any man alive.”

“Then men must change, Ham. They insist on being sure of us,” said Barbara, taking the words out of Mary’s lips, as if she detected in her husband’s sweeping admission some semblance of extenuation. “It’s tragic, but Mary can do nothing else.”

“What was his plea?” asked Ham undaunted.

“He was overwhelmed by my arrival; appalled by the fix in which he found himself. It wasn’t easy to be contrite with Sybil in the room and me to remind him of his declaration that she had revealed happiness to him. We had scarcely a word. Almost immediately he left us—to have a smoke. What plea could he set up except that he was tempted and fell? I shall write him; there will be no need of our meeting. I shall send for the children and there is very little else to settle.”

Ham’s brow wrinkled lugubriously. “Ollie has made a terrible mess of it certainly. It’s up to him to straighten the matter out if he can.”

This, though an admission that he sided with her,

was a bid for clemency, which she hastened to deny. "There's nothing he could say or do which would make any difference so far as our living together is concerned. Considering that our views were identical on this very sort of transgression, he will recognize the futility of trying to make me change my mind."

"It's bad enough as it is. But it isn't quite as though— That is, if I understood you correctly, Sybil held him off."

"Yes and no. Some day I'll tell you about Sybil. We'll leave her out now because I'm sure you're too straightforward to maintain there's any genuine distinction to be made because they were interrupted. It seemed to surprise Sybil that her assurance he was innocent didn't console me in the least, even when she declared that the fault was entirely hers."

"She confessed that, did she?" asked Barbara. "I've felt sure of it in spite of being so blind that I didn't detect a thing."

"Oh, yes, she shouldered all the blame; owned up to having enticed Oliver in the hope that I would take him back before she left the house. I think I told you she went away before me. But because she missed the point, it doesn't follow that it's not clear as daylight. Ham's a man, but he knows I'm right."

"Confound it, yes." Compressing his lips, Ham planted his elbows on the table and with his face between his hands stared moodily at fate. "There's no excuse for him whatever so far as I can see—except that he's a man. And as you rightly say, that's no longer a decent excuse. It never was much of one anyway. With such a wife as you the offense ought to have been impossible. Ollie too of all men; the salt of the earth as I said before. It beats me; I'm dazed. I'd like to stand up for him if I could because he's my best friend—

my ideal of a fine man, yes he was, but I can't conscientiously blame you for deciding to leave him. Feeling as you do, I don't see how you can go back—at present anyway. But it has cut me up so, I'm dazed I tell you. She got her work in while you were away, and you had to be away, there's the whole story. I'd have bet my bottom dollar it couldn't happen. But that's because the man was Ollie."

"Thank you, Ham. And when you've thought it over you will realize I can never go back."

It was plain that he was on her side, unequivocally if sadly. She saw him wander about the house during the next few days like one in a trance of misery. He offered to serve as a go-between; but in response to this suggestion she shook her head; it would not be of the slightest use. The pall of dejection which had descended upon them all was one of the unavoidable consequences of the tragedy. What had ruined her happiness and broken her heart could not fail to be distressing also to such intimate friends. Having disclosed the humiliating truth, she had to ask permission of Barbara to remain for a few days until her new arrangements were perfected.

Her plan was to engage lodgings in another part of the city, where her married identity was not known, send for the children, and pursue her profession under her maiden name as formerly, changing the location of her offices. No one would be the wiser except her social acquaintances who would be given to understand that she had left her husband for adequate cause, the nature of which could readily be whispered from one to another. This course seemed simple enough and obviated the necessity of consulting either lawyer or clergyman. Her ability to support herself and the children without aid from anybody was the strength of her position; it made

her virtually free. But the plan could not be carried out in a minute, and in the interval she must arrange to see the children.

Though averse to inflicting them on the Fords, she ended by accepting Barbara's offer to take the children in. This would involve rather a tight squeeze, but after all it would only be for a short time, and otherwise she must choose between not seeing them at all and re-entering her house from which she had shaken the dust forever. A visit would expose her to Oliver's expostulations and entreaties, from which she shrank instinctively. What was there to say? She must avoid a scene, which could not fail to be fruitless, for her mind was entirely made up.

Intent on carrying her plan into effect as soon as possible, Mary spent the morning in a search for suitable lodgings. At luncheon a note was delivered to her—in Oliver's handwriting. The messenger who left it at the door had inquired if she were stopping there. Loath as she was to bandy words, Mary realized that she had been expecting to hear from him. It was inevitable that he should write and should surmise correctly her whereabouts. She had intended to write later in the day and acquaint him with her decision to break off all relations and claim the children.

She retired to her room to read his communication. It was profusely abject, a pitiful torrent of words. He declared that he had been mad, weak, inexcusably reprehensible; had committed the unpardonable sin. He had wrecked their happiness and did not deserve to be forgiven. She had been warranted in leaving the house immediately. He admitted that any self-respecting woman of high ideals would have done the same. But for the children's sake, if for no other, she must not be precipitate; she must listen. After what had occurred,

it would sound incredible that he loved her just as deeply as ever ("A mockery rather," was Mary's comment); yet it was true nevertheless. He was a guilty cur; he had been infatuated, he granted this; but she had seen all there was to know and he was utterly ashamed of himself. She must not cast him off for a single slip (Oh! the ignominy of such palliation from Oliver). He besought her to bear in mind too that Sybil had repulsed him and was going to be married straightaway. He had been staring his wickedness and folly in the face ever since, trying to figure out how he could have acted so inconceivably. He was profoundly miserable; but he was not seeking to dodge. It was all a nightmare—and a wretched position to take; but might not a man still adore his wife as the one woman in the world and yet on the spur of the moment, through propinquity, lose his head so completely that for the time being black seemed white? He asked her to consider whether, if this were true, his repentance might not be sincere. In conclusion he implored her to come back and reassume their life under whatever terms of penance she chose to inflict; adding that the menace of losing her was so terrible that he was beside himself.

There were two sheets of note-paper entirely covered, in his bold, flowing hand. Mary had read with a sense of detachment, much as a judge, who, having listened to the evidence and arrived at a conclusion, hears the arguments which he has already anticipated. If she had tried to compose the typical letter of the conventional man in a similar plight, would it not have been the counterpart of this; even to the threadbare, specious insinuation that he could make love to another one minute and adore his wife in the next breath? The complete answer was: Turn the situation round about. If men were to be excused for breaking

down and given another chance, why not women also? What would Oliver have done, if he had caught her in the arms of Henry Thornton for instance? If he had not turned her out-of-doors as too vile to associate with her own children, only the husk of their relation as husband and wife would have remained. She would have been a social pariah, contaminated in his eyes forevermore, even if for form's sake he had permitted her to live under the same roof. Were she to go back, it would be for form's sake solely—in order that the world need not know openly what had happened. They could never be happy again. Their intercourse would be a living death, a clumsy lie, the daily insincerity of which would be far more injurious to the children in the end than the plain, dread truth. Her one present wish was to get away where she could forget, if possible, that he had ever existed.

“Oliver,” she wrote in answer that same afternoon, “what you ask is out of the question and you must perceive why. The sin is at your door, the hideous affront concerns me; but I could pass them both over perhaps if this were all. It's my faith in you—which was the very essence of my love—that is shattered. What drew me to you first was the belief that we looked at the fundamental things alike and would not be content with the makeshifts with which others have been content. As we walked hand in hand, I was not on my guard, because I thought I knew you through and through. If it be urged in extenuation that I took too much for granted—my answer is, I trusted you completely. So completely that now I see not you but another man. You are so different from what I ever imagined you could be, that you've ceased to be the Oliver Randall I supposed I knew. Oh, the pity of it after all these years! But though I'm broken-hearted, this means the end for

both of us necessarily. You implore me to put up with a divided allegiance; to pardon you because, now you've had a chance to think it over, I'm surely your first choice. The time when such an equivocation would solace an injured wife already seems remote. In the world of to-day the woman whose love has been killed has a moral right to reject such terms. There is no use in entreaty or in mincing matters. I shall never live with you again, Ollie. We should be wretched together. And so I'll send for the children to-morrow. Please have them ready by noon. When I decide where I am to live and am settled, I will arrange that you shall see them now and then. Don't offer me any money; that would affront me. I prefer to support them by my own exertions."

Mary read this answer thrice before despatching it. She had tried to write firmly and explicitly, but without upbraiding Oliver, putting the catastrophe in such a light that he could not fail to realize the hopelessness of his appeal or the finality of her decision. The letter might have been confined to a few words, or could have been infinitely longer. Nothing she could say could adequately represent her torture and humiliation, and her immediate desire was to go through the necessary formality as unemotionally as possible. At the same time, while closing the gates of reconciliation in his face, she was disposed to point out why his was the unpardonable sin and not averse to revealing between the lines the depth of her distress.

Her reply was delivered by hand so that Oliver would have ample time to collect the children's effects. After sending it she experienced a reaction from the state of mind which under the spur of righteous anger had been akin to energy. She felt let down and depressed and the atmosphere of the house seemed dark with gloom.

Both Barbara and Ham looked grave and troubled. Like a squirrel in a cage Mary revolved over and over again the sequence of events only to reach the same conclusion—that though guiltless she had made a mess of her life. Save that it was true, it appeared incredible that she had been compelled to leave her husband.

Often as she had heard the problem of divorce and separation discussed, Mary's interest in it had never been more than academic. But now she realized with a dull pain in her innermost heart that to be obliged to leave one's husband was like undergoing a capital operation, with the difference that the patient, however innocent, always emerged from the ordeal under a cloud. Divorce was a confession of failure. Mary's cheeks burned at the thought that it had come to be her failure. People would pity her, but they would shrug their shoulders when they spoke of her in private. The situation was actually vulgar, and she had prided herself on her fastidiousness. Now the fastidious would avoid her, as a person under a ban.

As she rebelled at the stigma, relief came in the counter-thought that, if it were the case of a man whose wife had misconducted herself, no one would think any the less of him. All his social circle would pity him, and every one would rush to leave cards as soon as he had married again.

It was simply because she was a woman that the best public opinion would try to smirch her though innocent;—another leaf from the gospel of a man-made world. This thought was just the tonic which Mary needed to recruit her ebbing forces paralyzed by fatigue and pain. She was seeking no divorce; there was no occasion to consult either her rector, Mr. Starr, or a legal adviser; what she demanded was something more vital and wide-

embracing—the right to live respectably and bring up her children apart from her husband, because he had forced her to it, without the slightest loss of social prestige.

Such thoughts had been her bitter food, as she engaged that evening in a listless conversation with Barbara. After a half-hour of futile talk about the children and their daily growth in leg and mind, Barbara drifted away for a good-night look at the nursery. Ham was immersed in the monthly bills at his desk. From the shadow where Mary sat, she observed him, and contrasted Barbara's domestic fate with her own.

The experiment of the Fords had justified itself completely. There was not a speck on their horizon. Barbara's literary position was assured; her royalties of one kind and another were so large that they had become an affluent couple; and above all she seemed supremely happy. Apart from her talent, she owed everything to the steady-going, reliable Ham. He had turned out an ideal husband. He had found his niche and enlarged it so as to become a commanding figure. How executive and resourceful he was.

Notwithstanding her own misery, it had been patent to her ever since she entered the house that Ham handled the domestic concerns with a minimum of friction. He seemed to anticipate everything that was required and to be fertile in expedients. He attended to every call on the telephone and his conversations were a model of concise lucidity. Such might have been her own lot but for one thing—the loose standards of her husband. There was the head and front of the offending. She had not asked that Oliver should be able to cook at a pinch and tend the children, but merely that when he was exposed to the wiles of another woman behind her back he should not break down.

As Mary thus communed with herself in tragic silence, Ham raised his head, frowned, and drummed with his fingers on the desk. Then he burst out: "It beats me. I've been trying to work it out ever since you told me." For an instant he was silent then, suddenly looking in her direction with the air of one who had decided to take a plunge, he continued: "I've only one clew, and it doesn't fit Ollie, except that he's a man too."

"What is it, Ham?"

"Something that happened to me. I wouldn't give it away except that I've gone through the alphabet from A to Z and there must be some explanation why he went to pieces." Ham paused. "See here, Mary," he resumed, "if I tell you this, you must promise on your Bible oath never to breathe a word to Barbara."

"I swear, Ham, if it's so important."

"And there's another thing I'd like to prevent if I could, but I fear that's impossible, at least until you've mulled it over—namely the fall I shall take in your esteem. I don't mind telling you," he added with his whimsical smile, resting his broad chin on his clasped fingers, "that having won my way little by little into your good graces has meant a lot to me, for you're about the finest woman I know, Mary. You didn't disguise that you thought Bab had thrown herself away when she married me. You set me down as an incompetent, one of those fellows who fit into a groove and stick and never get anywhere. When the twins arrived you had hard work not to give me a piece of your mind. If Bab's literary career had been nipped in the bud, you'd have laid all the blame on me, and you'd have been right. Ever since, though, I climbed into the same boat with you and became in my humble way a pioneer too, we've hit it off famously, and I'm mighty proud of the association. But even when you were convinced that I

was dragging Barbara down, you always thought of me as a moral man."

"And surely you are, Ham. Don't tell me you are not."

"That depends. I've tried to be. But I had a narrow escape about two years ago. Do you remember Bertha Davis?"

Mary, remembering her well as a household assistant several pegs above the ordinary domestic, prepossessing and gentle as well as efficient, nodded, adding parenthetically: "She appeared by far the nicest girl you ever had in the house."

"Exactly. And you took for granted she left of her own accord?"

"I supposed so; and was sorry for you, for you could not hope to duplicate her easily."

"She had no idea of going. I dismissed her. I couldn't run the risk of having her around any longer."

"You mean she was bad?"

"On the contrary, good as gold to the best of my knowledge and belief. I was the sinner—if that's the proper word. And the strangest part is that what happened or, rather didn't happen, flew up and hit me just like that"—in token of which Ham withdrew his hands from the support of his chin and struck them together with a sharp clap.

"It was this way," he continued, ignoring Mary's frown of dismay. "I took to her from the first. I saw she was a treasure, pretty and ladylike on top of being capable. We were thrown constantly together. Of course I had to see and talk to her innumerable times a day in my capacity as housekeeper, not like the ordinary man just coming and going. There was no one else about, and looking back I can see I invented opportunities. I thought I liked to watch her giving the

children their baths because she did it so handily, until suddenly one day I found I was feasting my eyes on her uncommonly beautiful arms and had been all along without admitting it. This ought to have put me on my guard; perhaps it did. Yet I didn't alter my habits, and thirty-six hours later I was possessed by a hungry desire to embrace her with all my might and plaster her with kisses. Right under the roof with my wife, with whom she wasn't really to be mentioned in the same breath, except—except. I've never found out yet exactly what swept me off my feet unless it was being too constantly near her. Luckily I had some sense, and got rid of Bertha. It wasn't easy though explaining either to her or Bab why I wasn't satisfied with her."

"How awful!" exclaimed Mary with a gasp as he finished. "Not merely sense, Ham, say 'self-control.'"

"If you're looking for a substitute, try 'luck.' I suppose it's clear why I'm making a clean breast of what I ought to be ashamed of: it may let Ollie out."

Mary shook her head with determination. "Granting that the cases are in any degree parallel, there's the vital distinction that you resisted. I saw what you were leading up to; but you put the hideous temptation away and showed yourself a true man."

"I kept my head. If I'd yielded, I should have been a hound; that's admitted. But when it comes to casting off a husband for good and all—there may be extenuating circumstances which ought to be taken into account. This pioneer business you and I are booming introduces new complications. I'm not defending Ollie, God knows, but he had Sybil on his hands day and evening just as I had Bertha, while our wives were preoccupied. I'm afraid it's true, Mary, that under certain conditions a man is never so moral as a woman. A decent man, I mean, as a decent woman. Things pop

into his mind that never do into hers, and that's the equation you social reformers who are inaugurating a new domestic era seem to lose sight of."

Mary pursed her lips. "We don't lose sight of it because we don't admit it. Now you argue like a reactionary, Ham."

"I'm not arguing at all; I'm merely instancing pitiful facts—hideous, if you prefer. Reverse the situation. Imagine yourself or Barbara entertaining such a feeling toward some stray man out of your class with whom you were brought in contact. The bare suggestion makes you shudder; I see it in your eyes. No normal woman would be open to such a temptation. But look at me. I'm normal; a brand snatched from the burning, but I singed my whiskers. We watch and pray, yet the devil gets us off our guard. Take it from me—we're talking plainly, Mary, and too much is at stake to shilly-shally—the lure of sex is different."

"How do you know? Why should there be any difference?"

"Because I'm I, you're you. We're differently fashioned; there's the unvarnished truth. And so——"

"You'd make that an excuse for license. No, the sole difference, as I believe, is that generations of indulgence tolerated and winked at have made men what they are. And Ollie's the last man to plead it. He professed to stand as strongly as I for the abolition of the double standard."

"Not an excuse, I've told you. God forbid!" To emphasize his protest, Ham grasped an ivory paper-cutter in semblance of a whale's tooth which lay within his reach and struck its point upon the table. "I'm down on Ollie utterly. It's simply this that if I'm right, you—I mean the lot of you, the finest women in the world, who threaten to keep the balance even or dis-

card us—are bucking up against a primal instinct; and so—here’s what was in my mind—it’s up to you in this new shuffle that is to metamorphose matrimony, not to lose sight of us, to keep a string tied to us as it were, so that we aren’t left too much to our own devices. Otherwise there’s no knowing sometimes—as in my case. You asked me how it happened. If men are different, it doesn’t make them otherwise by saying what they ought to be. You took your eyes off Ollie—and encouraged him to make friends with a barrel of gunpowder. Now that he hasn’t any hair or eyebrows, I guess he wishes that you hadn’t.”

Here was the same insinuation in another guise—that she had been responsible. Based too on the repugnant, hackneyed argument which the new thought had pledged itself to discredit by unity of effort all along the line. Mary felt that she had aged perceptibly since the night before and as if the evil of the world was banded against her. Ham’s determination to find some loophole for Oliver’s escape had doubtless led him to exaggerate the episode on which he based his plea for clemency; nevertheless it had disgusted her. To admit the validity of such an inference was to be false to her standards and to hark back to a worn-out social philosophy. Creditable as it was to Ham to be sorry for Oliver and to emphasize his desire to see them reunited, his recourse to such a specious palliative had the effect of removing one more exception to the general run of masculine depravity without convincing her in the least. Though her ears would have drunk in eagerly any valid excuse, nothing was to be gained by prolonging a discussion which had already trespassed on the lewd in spite of good intention.

Rising, she said: “It’s too late to consider what his feelings on the subject may be. Don’t you suppose I’ve

been making every allowance that I can? The painful and humiliating step I feel forced to take is too terrible for words."

"Oh yes, I know. As I've said before, I can't blame you for doing what you've decided to do. I merely hoped— Well it's a ghastly business whichever way you look at it," he murmured in derogation of his own appeal and limply laid aside the paper-cutter.

"Good night, Ham. You've been very kind and— well-meaning." Then with the air of one confiding an inner sorrow, she added, as she held his hand: "The strangest part of the whole awful reality is that it could have happened to Oliver and me. I had supposed we were the least likely people in the world."

CHAPTER XX

AFTER his wife's exodus Oliver Randall sat far into the night in the "den," where he had taken refuge. The course of astounding events which culminated in the departure of the two women was succeeded by a stillness which convicted him collectively of treachery, libertinism and, what for the moment seemed most shameful of all, cowardice. He had stolen away to avoid facing the music and as a result he did not know exactly what had happened save that both had left the house.

As to the precise significance of their exits he could only surmise. He had lacked the pluck to hinder either; but presumably Sybil's was final. It could scarcely be otherwise in view of the avowal from her own lips that she was engaged to Henry Thornton. This was the most bewildering item in the whole appalling, zigzag bill of particulars filed against him. He had been wholly unprepared for it; and yet now that he knew, he ought not to have been so. Yet there had been nothing in her demeanor for weeks to suggest that she cared a button for Henry Thornton. On the contrary, he had almost gathered——

Not that she had encouraged him. He exonerated her. It was all his own fault. She was so confoundingly alluring and companionable that he had lost his head and made a hot-blooded, licentious fool of himself. She had headed him off by telling him of her engagement,

which was like a lash in the face, and then Mary had appeared. Sybil had repulsed him, but somehow it was too horrible to contemplate what the situation might have been had Mary not arrived just when she did. It was bad enough as it was. And then he had slipped away without trying to straighten matters out.

Oliver quailed before the recollection. He could have said nothing that would have satisfied either of the women or himself. It was the consciousness of this that had caused him to vanish. He saw only too clearly now that he had been detestably weak and carnal minded, and he was overwhelmed by shame and self-reproach. He had toppled off the pinnacle of his wife's unquestioning faith and lay a broken idol shattered into fragments. How to patch the pieces together was his quandary. Somehow Mary must be made to see that she was the only one he loved in spite of appearances and that what she had witnessed was only aberration on his part, disgraceful but veritable. Her hasty departure meant that she was cut to the heart, horrified, disgusted, and incensed beyond words. No wonder that she should be, for besides the ordinary safeguard of conjugal loyalty she had been entitled to rely on his undisguised abhorrence for just this sort of thing. She must be eating her heart out in wondering how it could have happened to them. How had it ever happened? When he tried to penetrate back of the pitiless concrete facts he encountered only bewilderment. Crushed by the query, Oliver buried his face in his hands and shook convulsively. But she would come back. She had left her clothes; and the children were up-stairs asleep in their beds. Under the stress of grief and indignation she had gone away to face the catastrophe beyond his reach and she would return in the morning.

It was this hope which prompted the contrite and

dismayed Oliver to endeavor to snatch a few hours of sleep. To sit up all night revolving the uncertainties of the tragic complication and anathematizing himself would avail only to render him a fit subject for a mad-house. Before lying down he sought the room where Arnold and Christabel were asleep and bent in abject tenderness over them whose welfare his lustful folly had imperilled. As he kissed them softly in turn, again he inquired how he could have been so crazy. But when he had closed the door behind him, his characteristic tendency for relentless analysis elicited the thought by way of answer even at this moment—suppose that Sybil instead of repulsing had encouraged and reciprocated his advances, would he be glad or sorry?

Though he started at the elfish suggestion, it held him even to the point of the inquiry—was he so certain that she had not encouraged him? Oliver found himself like one spellbound living over again the scene in which he had endeavored to take her in his arms. She had warded him off, and he had been keenly disappointed—no doubt of that; but without abating his purpose—no doubt of that also. And though she had escaped, there had been something unmistakably wistful in her manner which had left him not without hope even when she had flung her engagement in his face. How if her words were a blind and she did care, would he wish it so? “No, no,” he cried to himself in expostulation but with perplexed anguish as one who dallies with yet flees from a bitter-sweet fancy already tabooed, “there’s no one whom I love or wish to love but Mary. She’ll be back in the morning—she’ll be back in the morning, and I shall be able to tell her so.”

This conviction enabled him finally to lose consciousness and sustained him next morning until the arrival of the postman. When no missive or message came

from her, concern took possession of him, and he telephoned to the office that he was detained at home. What did her silence mean? Where had she gone? What had become of her? Among the terrible possibilities which occurred to him was that of suicide; her distress at his perfidy had been so great that she had made away with herself. But this he did not credit longer than an instant. With all her intensity Mary was too well-balanced and individual a person—too little of a coward also—to consider seriously such a course. It was fortunate that the children knew nothing of their mother's arrival the night before; they had gone to school as usual. When the morning passed without word of any sort Oliver wondered if she were expecting an apology from him. Then it was that he wrote his agonized, penitent letter in which he grovelled spiritually and implored her forgiveness.

And where to send what he had penned so effusively? Mary would not have gone far, and reflection suggested the probability that she had taken refuge with the Fords. When the messenger by whom he sent the letter reported she was there, Oliver hoped the worst was over. The shortness of his suspense seemed to him a favorable augury; but his heart sank as he read her reply: "I shall never live with you again, Ollie. We should be wretched together." Not coming back? Planning to desert him? He refused to believe his eyes. "And so I'll send for the children to-morrow. Please have them ready by noon." Chillingly concise and appallingly definite. Not only had she resolved to forsake him, but to carry off the children also; terrible as was the threat, the words were there and admitted of no other construction.

Oliver put his hand to his head. A strong man, he felt confused and at his wit's end. This punishment

was more than he could bear—and it was plain that Mary was in earnest. Apparently she did not even intend to see him; she was going to send for the children. Guilty as he recognized himself to be, and as he had admitted to her that he was, he had never seriously contemplated that she would go to such an extreme. This signified the breaking up of his home, the virtual alienation of his children, the utter ruin of his happiness. When the news got out people would shrug their shoulders and say: “The Randalls too; it must be in the air. They always had the appearance of feeling sure their union was founded on a rock.” So it had been until yesterday. And she would accept no money; was planning to manage completely without his aid. If she had her way, he would be a domestic outcast—at arm’s length, and the world would ask why. Why, indeed? The knowledge that his wife had left his house would react upon his political fortunes, and he was aware that he was being groomed by his friends as a candidate for lieutenant-governor. Did she wish to blight his prospects as well as break his heart?

He must have exaggerated her language. Spurred by this forlorn hope, Oliver scrutinized once more the letter which he had already read thrice. Its tone of finality, like the blow of a club, induced stupefaction, the only respite from which was in protest. He began to feel resentment. What, after all, had he done which would justify his wife in leaving his house and kidnapping Arnold and Christabel? If it came to proofs—and rather than give them up, he would battle for them in the courts—the worst which could be alleged was that he had tried to embrace his wife’s friend who was living in the house with his wife’s approbation. That was the sum and substance of his offense so far as any one could show, and his intention had been frustrated. Any judge

would tell Mary that she ought to return; that she had a right to be furious and to leave him for a little, but that after a fortnight or so at furthest, in view of the utterly contrite letter he had written, it was her duty to give him a second chance. This was all he asked—a second chance. If she refused it, he could not compel her to return, but he would decline to deliver the children. He would make her fight for them. Moreover her refusal to come back, if persisted in, would indicate that she had ceased to love him, and would provide him with an excuse for objecting to Sybil's marriage to Henry Thornton. Oliver realized that he was becoming a little desperate, but he felt aggrieved. He was ready to be punished and to eat humble-pie, but Mary must not drive him too far.

Having thus invoked pugnacity as an antidote to his distress, he derived considerable comfort from the frame of mind. He deliberately refrained from preparations to get the children ready and spent the evening defiantly pacing the deserted ground-floor trio of rooms to the echo of his own solitary footsteps. Ever and anon he kept saying: "Why doesn't she send for me to come and talk things over? Her stand is unreasonable and she can't succeed. Do I not know the law? Do I not know the law?" But behind his assurance, lurked the disturbing knowledge that if they could not come to terms and Mary insisted on leaving him, the court might give the children to the mother because they were young. Of tender years—this was the legal phrase—but both of them were past that age. Still there was the menace of the modern doctrine, which in the absence of express fault seemed to favor the mother—even though it broke up a man's home. But he would test it if he had to.

In his agitation he took down from the shelf a volume

of reports in which was set forth the old theory of the common law—which recognized the father's right to be so much superior to the mother's that even when a woman had left her husband on the alleged ground of ill-treatment and taken with her their infant child then at the breast, it was brought into court on *habeas corpus* and delivered to the father, though he might be living illicitly with another woman, unless the mother could show that he intended to abuse his right. Since that day the ancient doctrine had been gradually relaxed; but surely it was not just that the converse should be true—that the woman should get everything. The phrase allured Oliver and he repeated it. Woman might need some redress—labor under a few inequalities still in England; but was there anything in America that she hadn't already? Only the right to vote. But surely this became superfluous if she was able to abandon a man's house and carry off his children because he had stumbled once. That was all he had done—stumbled.

He went to bed in a belligerent mood, but awoke at daybreak limp and despondent. His bravado had left him, and he was miserably aware that, in case he fought, the decision was likely to be against him. He would be allowed to visit the children, but they would live with Mary and be under her control. She could not, if she would, obtain a divorce, for the cause was not sufficient in law. But she could insist on her determination not to live with him, and, if it came to a disclosure of the evidence, this would be the result. And now by the cold light of morning he queried also if he could afford a contest despite his devotion to his children. The notoriety of a trial would be fatal to his political chances. He was already in the public eye and in a receptive attitude toward the new offer of advancement. If publicity were avoided, the affair might be a nine-days

wonder concealed from the wider constituency; but head-lines in the newspapers would handicap him hopelessly in the political running. Here Mary had the whip-hand over him. Did it not almost seem as if she had taken advantage of his vulnerability?

Nevertheless, he allowed the children to go to school as usual; and when one of Barbara's maids arrived to fetch them, he simply told her to inform Mrs. Randall that he desired to talk with her. This was at noon, the specified hour. At three o'clock Ham Ford was ushered in, and for a moment his coming held out the hope of compromise. They met at first as if nothing had happened. The freemasonry between men draws the line only at theft and falsehood when it comes to shaking hands. But, having demonstrated his loyalty as a friend, Ham did not flinch from his errand.

"Mary insists on having the children, Ollie, and I've come for them."

"But Ham," he protested—"she hasn't even talked the matter over with me yet."

"I've urged her to and she refuses. You've stated all there is to say in your letter, she declares. It's useless; she won't see you."

Oliver dropped his head between his hands and stared at the carpet. He read into the laconic words that his friend's commiseration and desire to extricate him were not inconsistent with taking sides against him. Looking up he said: "It's a hideous mess. How I got into it, God knows. I suppose Mary has told you everything. She caught me making love to Sybil."

Ham nodded. "About the last thing the friends who knew you best would have believed possible." To have said more would have been officious; to have said less might have seemed condonation, whereas Ham was profoundly sick at heart.

"I know. I'm not blaming anybody or anything—except my miserable self." Oliver spoke in soliloquy as one who throws excuses to the winds. "All that is left to me is to win her back."

"Exactly. And you haven't mended matters any by your delay about the children. Your message exasperated her. She says they are her children; that she suffered for them and brought them into the world. There's something in that, you know; she did. Of course you're tremendously attached to them too, and broken-hearted at the thought of separation, as I pointed out to her. But she reminds me of a lioness defending her cubs. I don't wish to irritate you, but she said finally: 'Tell him that if he persists in not sending them, I shall go straight to a lawyer.' And she would, Ollie. No one could restrain her."

"It has come to that, has it? Well, in all probability, she'd win. There's a legal opinion for you. We should both be spattered in the process, but I should get the worst of it in a double sense under the circumstances." With knitted brow he struck his fist against his palm. "She has me treed, Ham. And you're here to advise me to come down."

"It looks to me your only hope."

"But you think she ought to give me another chance, don't you?"

"I think she's justified in leaving you if that's what you mean. I cooked up the best defense for you I could, but as I've heard the story, there isn't much of any."

"I lost my head—that's all I can make of it. I don't blame you, Ham, for thinking me pretty low down." He paused a moment, then asked wistfully: "Does she know I'm a candidate for lieutenant-governor?"

Ham nodded. "Barbara read it out to her from the newspaper last night, hoping it would make her hesitate."

"Then you did advise her to forgive me?"

Ham compressed his lips so that he resembled a contemplative Chinese mandarin. "We were both of us pretty well broken up by what has happened; we are still. Because you were you, we hoped Mary would pass it over—seeing the worst didn't actually happen; that it didn't look like luck. A less intelligent wife might have been willing to discriminate. Sybil Fielding! A nice little woman, but not in the enchantress class as I saw her. What did she do to you anyway?"

"Sybil? Miss Fielding?" Oliver's manner indicated surprise as if the inquiry were novel. "It wasn't her fault. The kind of woman she is?" He hesitated a moment. "There's the peculiar part. Except for her pretty foreign ways she's merely the every-day sort—sweet, gentle, alluring. Cleverer than she appears on the surface when one gets to know her, but—but nothing unusual. Mary could give her points on everything. I knew this all the while, and yet I was crazy about her in the end. It looks as if I grew dependent on her without realizing it, and imagined qualities that didn't exist." Having secured at last an audience, Oliver hoped by candor to feel his way to the solution which he still lacked.

"It seems now too big a risk to have run. I said as much to Mary. But she claimed she had the right to trust you. And of course she had," Ham added with a touch of severity intended to counteract the admission which had slipped out unawares.

"She had the right—she had the right. Nevertheless I seemed to be hypnotized while it lasted—to my everlasting disgrace. But it ought to count for something that Sybil's out of the way for good. It shocked Mary that she is to marry Henry Thornton, but it should convince her that she didn't care for me."

Ham started as if at the touch of galvanism. "What is that? Sybil marry Henry Thornton?" Then as he read the confirmation on his friend's face he added: "Mary said there was something she would tell me later, but this mixes up matters worse than ever. If it's genuine though, it seems to exonerate Sybil."

"And convicts me as a wanton libertine." He looked at Ham with a wry smile. "I'm up against the—facts—for the time being anyway." He paused a moment, then went on. "The children aren't ready; haven't an inkling of what has happened, but think their mother is still away. You can tell Mary that I will bring them to your house sometime this afternoon and—and," he added with a gulp, "that I won't ask to see her."

"You're wise in that. It's making the only amends you can make at the moment." Ham looked greatly relieved. "Well, I'll tell her," he said and rose] to go.

Oliver held him at the door to add: "You're broken up by what's happened. I don't blame you for looking grave and thinking me a rotter. But because it isn't much clearer to me than it is to you how it all happened—keep on speaking a good word for me, Ham, if you can. I'm ready to take my medicine, but for God's sake try to prevent her from giving me too big a dose." He faltered and the tears rushed to his eyes so that he turned away to hide his emotion.

Ham put out his hand. "You can count on me for that. I'm disappointed in you, Ollie, and flabbergasted—that's a fact. But I'm sorry for you, dreadfully sorry for you both. Mary's deeply affronted—so there's no use talking further to her now. But I'll stick at it and after Sybil's married and settled and Mary has a chance to miss you, she may look at the matter differently. At present," he added, "she keeps putting it

this way: 'Suppose I were the offender, would he pass it over?' I dare say you'd answer 'Yes' to-day, but a week ago you'd have found it impossible. You'd have declared so at the outset at all events." Musing a moment, he added, as if he were imparting a confidence: "You and I haven't lived nearly forty years without discovering women won't stand any longer numerous things they used to put up with and that refusal to make fish of one sex and flesh of the other is in the air. We both subscribed to it and supposed we believed so; and then this cyclone struck us—for it has keeled me over too. Well, good-by."

Three days later Mary had established herself in her new quarters—a suite of comfortable rooms in a recently constructed apartment-house remote from the neighborhood where she was known. It was not difficult to find accommodations which combined the triple assurance of respectability, social seclusion, and freshness of premises, for Benham had entered on a phase of development which advertised these advantages. That later stage of rapid civic growth which produced the huge industrial plants, the imposing residences of the magnates, and a variety of stately public edifices had been succeeded by an activity in building operations the impetus of which was an urgent demand for pleasant modern homes from an increasing constituency with definite aspirations. The promoters found they could scarcely erect fast enough a class of apartment-house which provided a modish exterior, close vicinity to a trolley-line, and compact modern domestic conveniences or, in other words, a kitchenette instead of a kitchen. By the substitution of light housekeeping for the old-fashioned culinary chores the young wives who occupied these flats were virtually exempt from soiling their delicate hands and spoiling their beautiful complexions, with

the result that the difficulties of the servant problem were met more than half-way. There were spring locks so one had merely to close the door in order to go shopping or to the theatre care-free or to pass the day in touring, for the domestic liberty vouchsafed was best catered to by the ownership of an inexpensive motor-car kept at the garage round the corner.

In her selection Mary was sensible of keeping abreast of the times, though she was too sad to notice more in detail than that the arrangements suited her necessities. One must eat to live, some creature comforts were essential to mental efficiency, but now that hot-water in the tap or a fire involved only a turn of the wrist, and so many edibles could be bought ready for serving with next to no effort, it was clear that she and Christabel with the assistance of one maid could do the housekeeping famously, and yet have nearly all their time for other things. Her daughter must be taught to be a no less proficient cook than she was herself, but to make use of modern labor-saving methods. And Arnold must do his part too; share with them the domestic duties.

The transference of her effects was a simple matter for she accepted only her wardrobe and a few articles that came under the head of personal possessions, such as wedding-presents. Of these she made a list. It did not interest her to consider whether she could legally call upon Oliver to relinquish a portion of the household furniture. If it were a question of pleasing her in the hope of inducing her to change her mind, she did not doubt that he would be more than ready to furnish the flat from floor to ceiling. She desired to leave law and legal considerations out of the question, for she was not relying on them. All she asked was to be let alone, and in return she elected to waive all the claims included

under the general term "alimony," which women without the means of earning a livelihood had to enforce if they did not wish to starve.

Consequently she did not begrudge the considerable drain upon her bank-account which new furniture and upholsteries necessitated. Thanks to her habit of laying up for a rainy day, she had a wide-enough margin left after these preliminary expenditures to carry them along until more professional income should accrue. She prided herself on letting only five days elapse between the morning when she awoke too prostrated to think of work and her return to business. In the interval she had decided not to move her offices. Her first impulse was to flee from the neighborhood because it was her husband's location as well as her own, and partly (when it came to analysis) to hide her head. But business acumen and self-respect had both remonstrated. The location was desirable and she could not afford to incur the risks of sequestering herself. Busybodies might be as likely to ascribe removal to a sense of guilt as to the desire to avoid former associations. It was her own name not his under which she had been doing business and the sign on the door would be both a protection and a license—for she intended that her visiting-cards should also read henceforth *Mrs. Mary Arnold*. "Mrs." because she was a married woman and the mother of children, but the rest because she was living apart for cause.

There had been a certain exhilaration in the moving and in setting the flat to rights. In those five days she had worked so hard and used her wits so assiduously that she had been able to escape all sensibility save the incubus of a distress which was now heartache and now a vertigo of resentment. When her arrangements were complete and she was to all intents free to fold her hands at night and survey with complacency the ex-

ternals of her new fireside, Mary could no longer avoid the only two perplexities which had not decided themselves by unconscious cerebration while she was preoccupied—what she should tell the children and what the world—the people whose good opinion she valued—would think of her.

It was while she was facing both of these considerations after the children had gone to bed that she found herself involuntarily twisting her wedding-ring. The reminder suggested that this was the first time she had given this emblem a thought, yet here it was on her finger. What should she do with it? How easily it came off! In the by-gone days it had slipped off not long after her marriage while she was washing her hands and she had been glad, for this left her free to remove it ever after when occasion or even the humor of the moment demanded.

Mary removed the ring now and scrutinized it. Certainly it came off more easily than usual, and so suggested that she had lost weight during her ordeal. She read the inscription "O. R. to M. A." with the date—fifteen years ago. Years that had seemed until the other day a triumph of happiness and were now—a mockery. For all the symbol could signify henceforth, it might as well be cast into the sea. What should she do with it? Return it to Oliver? Put it into a drawer? There was no sense in wearing it any longer, that was certain.

Yet, though she reasoned thus, she was suddenly seized by reluctance to part with it—one of those strange accesses like counter-waves to which she was subject, and which were best described as weakness. They came without warning, but she believed she had outgrown them. She felt limp, unnerved, and almost on the verge of fainting. She yielded to this vacillation by

restoring the ring to her finger. She need not decide at once what disposition to make of it. A host of more important matters demanded her attention and in the interval she would continue to wear it.

The most important of these was what to say to the children. Up to this point she had merely informed them in the most general terms that she and their father had decided to live apart. She had met their consternation and wondering grief with the specific that she would tell them why later. "The truth shall make you free" was the cardinal maxim of her faith, and yet somehow she shrank from the baldness and the humiliation of saying: "I caught your father embracing your Aunt Sybil, so I left him." They would be forced to believe what she told them, but the confession would sound no less vulgar than incredible. Her first intention had been to tell them all—to say that for the future they were three united against one by the common bond of a mortal injury. But now that the separation was a reality she did not feel certain. Their father's reputation, like the wedding-ring, still put forth a claim upon her. The children were too old to be left in complete ignorance; in the end perhaps they must know all; but for the present nothing was to be gained by poisoning their young lives by a recital of the exact wrongs responsible for the family disruption. The essential disaster lay in the failure of her marriage; nothing could exceed the horror of this. For the present at least she would require them to trust to her assurance that no other solution was possible.

As to her friends, the situation was different, but far clearer. Here again she must face failure on the surface. There was no escape from the bitter fact that her marriage had proved unsuccessful. Yet she craved and would insist upon the credit of a martyr. For this

reason she wished a few of her closest friends like Mrs. Clifford Palmer and Mrs. Gregory Walworth to know the exact circumstances so that they would be at no disadvantage in according her the moral support to which she was entitled. If there were still opprobrium in the mere act of leaving one's husband for proper cause, she would not accept it. Her battle should be exactly on this ground, in championship of a status the foundation of which was not mere legal sanction but spiritual self-respect which was the precursor of a new freedom and a new social code.

CHAPTER XXI

SYBIL FIELDING became Mrs. Henry Ives Thornton within a fortnight of her departure from the Randalls; it was one of those improvised weddings by which lovers no longer very young steal a march on their acquaintances, thus obviating both delay and prematrimonial preparations. Their world was given to understand that, having discovered their mutual attachment, they had taken it into their heads to slip out and be married. Such was the surface belief; but an undercurrent of rumor, proceeding from intimate friends who claimed to know, ascribed connection between this hasty ceremony and the separation of the Oliver Randalls. All that those in possession of the facts were willing to state was that Mrs. Randall had left her husband's roof owing to his attentions to his wife's close friend and domestic helper and had taken the children with her.

A certain reticence which cloaked these whisperings left much to the imagination. There was no disputing the astounding news that the Randalls were no longer living together; but even the intimates who asserted that it was altogether Oliver's fault had not yet recovered from their surprise and significantly manifested their concern by adding that it was a terrible pity. If any couple had been considered safe from shipwreck, it was they. From this posture of regret it was easy for the listener to arrive at the inquiry—How can there have been anything really out of the way, if Henry Thornton has married her?

In short, the undercurrent of rumor left that small portion of the community which was really curious in a puzzled frame of mind. To be established as the lawful wife of one of the most reputable and discriminating men in Benham—one who presumably could pick and choose—was surely no slight certificate of character. On the other hand, there was no blinking the inference that something in the relations of the trio had caused the breach, whether one used as a test the gravity and reluctance of the Fords, who when cornered took Mrs. Randall's side, or the more garrulous partisanship of Deborah Palmer's "I know what I'm talking about. She has ample cause—such as no self-respecting woman could tolerate—for leaving him." But though, if pressed, Mrs. Palmer added in confidence, "Mary says she will never go back," it was evident that even she, despite her loyalty, regarded this threat as the revelation of a deeply outraged nature rather than a rooted purpose. Champion as she was of the new purity, which included the thought as well as the deed (and Mrs. Palmer took care to interject that, without thanks to the husband, the offence appeared to have stopped short of the actual deed), she would have been apt to say if required to define her attitude in words—that the breach could hardly be irreparable if the source of the trouble is married to some one else.

Indeed it would have wounded Mary to the quick had she realized that her firmest supporters were cherishing already at the back of their minds the thought of patching matters up later between her and Oliver. For the present obviously nothing could be done; they were best apart. But this was one of the cases which should be glossed over so as to avoid publicity for the sake of the children, in order not to jeopardize the husband's political career, and in the ultimate interest of the wife.

Therefore, though a wider circle wondered and it was definitely known that Mary had taken up her residence in another part of the city under her maiden name, comparatively little was said aloud. The tongue of gossip wagged of course, but could not magnify the affair without casting aspersions on the latest bride, and this no one seemed disposed to do. For Mary had not interfered. Was she so stunned that she had refrained until it was too late from carrying out her purpose to warn the bridegroom? Or, when it came to the point, had the mortifying awkwardness of such a retaliation sealed her lips? Perhaps Mary did not know exactly. Perhaps she had only half believed that Sybil would dare. Now that the wedding was a reality, the opportunity, if she genuinely desired it, was lost forever.

But, if Mary did not know her own mind on this point, what of Sybil's inner consciousness? As Mrs. Henry Thornton she occupied, for the moment at least, the centre of the stage. The satisfaction of her triumph contained no alloy of regret. The essential thing for her had been brought to pass—she was established for life. And now that the bargain was consummated beyond recall, she would not revert to her former status if she could. The bed of roses on which she lay was shared not with a monster but with an amiable, sensible, considerate husband who doted on her and whose embraces even she did not find disagreeable. Henry Thornton might not be exciting (she was not yet sure that he would not prove to be), but he was far from being either a tyrant or a cipher.

Yet, now that she was safely and happily married, it was inevitable that Sybil, after the glamour of being the mistress of an imposing establishment had faded, should reconsider her own part in the episode which had culminated in disaster to the others concerned. On the plea of teaching a lesson in order to play the coquette,

had she fallen a little in love without intending to? If so, her marriage was a deliberate flight from danger all the more creditable because an act of friendship as well as of renunciation. But there was a furtive quality in Sybil's brain ever ready to veil the exact truth when it suited her not to see too clearly. While acknowledging that her own tendency had not been proof against strong temptation and ready to admit that, if the path had been clear, she would have nestled in the arms of the man who had been thrown at her head, she shrank into herself as a virtuous wife in possession of everything which makes life delectable before the insinuation that her own wound was more than a scratch. It did not seem necessary even to inquire what would have happened if Mary had not pulled aside the curtain. She had kept Oliver at arm's length with difficulty and in good faith up to that moment, and now that she looked back she congratulated herself on a resistance which no one—even her own self—could prove was merely coy or prudent.

That everything was over between her and him went without saying, both because she had every intention of remaining a decorous, grateful wife, and also by way of expiation, if any were due, which prompted her to try by every means in her power to reunite husband and wife. She entertained no doubt of Mary's obduracy at first. But Sybil was confident of what would happen in the long run, notwithstanding the sternness of the new race of women. There was irony in the fact that Henry knew nothing of the matter and could know nothing except through Mary. Sybil had no fear that Mary would speak out. Even if she did speak, Henry would not believe the woman who had refused him and picked a quarrel with gentle and sympathetic Sybil, but the wife of his bosom, who was enriching his life and en-

larging his social experience with lavish hand. Sybil had been obliged to tell Henry that she had quarrelled with Mary, but she had spoken vaguely of the cause of the disagreement, and Henry had shown little curiosity about the details. Sybil, rich in Old World experience, was sure that her husband would be the last person to hear the true story of the Randall household. Barring an anonymous letter, there was no one but Mary who would venture to inform him even of the meagre facts which others knew. And this was the one occasion, as Sybil shrewdly guessed, when Mary would bite her lips in silence.

For Sybil, thus occupying the centre of the stage, serene in her outlook and absorbed by her new surroundings, the weeks and months passed swiftly. Her husband, whom she had liked at the outset, improved on acquaintance. He was generous, presentable, and tactful, three traits which helped to make negligible for the moment the lack of a more ecstatic emotion in her own breast than a fervent desire to please him. She could not be otherwise than radiant when all the luxuries she had longed for as out of reach since she could first remember were dropped into her lap in such profusion that her brain swam. She never had to shake the tree; all her desires were anticipated. And when by way of a return she essayed the only rôle which she knew—that of the ingratiating, bounteous hostess—Sybil had the satisfaction of realizing that in no other way could she have pleased him better. Sentiment apart, he had longed for a wife who should join hands with him in creating the social atmosphere to which he aspired, a happy blending of opulence, manners, and art. For Benham had developed here and there a secret longing for that gossamerlike, elusive possession for which there is no world synonym except good breeding—a posses-

sion frequently innate, but never to be acquired ready made.

So preoccupied was Sybil with the congenial task of imparting to her town house and to "Foxgrove" the effect of being lived in by a woman and in marshalling her social energies, that the arrival of her baby was virtually a surprise. Yet the indulgence of wondering how such a startling occurrence could have taken place without more complicity of soul on her part was forbidden by the desperate character of her confinement. She was in more serious peril than the physicians would admit until she was pronounced out of danger; and though she experienced the joy of clasping the son for whom she had suffered and knowing that he lived, this strange rapture was succeeded by growing solicitude, for the child was puny. Nevertheless, he would have survived but for the unexpected. Science had coaxed him to the point where vigor seemed possible when, at the end of his first year, he succumbed to a convulsion.

Why had he died? Could she not have given him her very life's blood for nourishment? She was completely old-fashioned in spirit, and yet she had lost him. Such was Sybil's plaint. For another year she lived as one enveloped by a dense, dark cloud, to all intents an invalid and much of the time on her couch. They had told her she could have no more children. Feeble and listless, she simply existed from day to day, her mind a virtual blank.

When at last she began to return to life, her first emotion was to bemoan that she was an old, old woman with nothing to live for; her next to be touched by the tireless devotion of her husband of whose constant presence at her bedside she had been dimly aware, but which had elicited no response until now. How assiduous,

patient, and considerate he was. Her heart warmed to him fondly. She could never love him as he hoped to be loved, but since she had to live, surely she would live to help him. As soon as she recovered her strength she would aid him to make a career for himself of one sort or other. He had qualities which would stand him in good stead if his ambition were aroused.

One afternoon as she sat propped by her pillows, a hand resting on the coverlet in the protecting clasp of her husband, it suddenly occurred to her to ask: "What has been happening elsewhere while I have been lying here?" Henry was there to tell her, more than thankful to encourage her dawning interest. So she listened to his news administered in lively, random but homœopathic doses, and when he paused she often put a question. His budget was no small one, containing as it did the lost occurrences of two entire years, beginning with the gossip concerning contemporaries which would amuse her—this engagement and that innovation or folly. The latest fad was the new dancing, which Terpsichorean accomplishment moving across the country had just reached Benham. Mrs. Gregory Walworth had made a special trip from Pittsburgh in order to demonstrate exactly how it should be done and every one had flocked to see her.

Then there were the new fashions in dress, especially that of the young girls; it was difficult to distinguish the wearers from those outside the pale of feminine morals. Sybil, amused to think that the men were shocked, murmured: "But we dress to please you always." Henry would have none of this and waxing serious stroked his short beard in token of his perplexity and asked: "How is one to reconcile their current ambition to resemble *cocottes*, with their campaign for a cleaner masculine code? And the very girls whose

costumes are the most suggestive discuss sex hygiene the most assiduously. You'll find a new world when you go about, my dear." And then remembering it would not do to be too sober all at once, he added: "Speaking of topsy-turvy, you'll be entertained to hear that Ham Ford has come a cropper at last. A serpent crept into his Utopia and stung him; a discharged cook has sued him for defamation of character. It seems he told the truth in the testimonial he wrote—said nothing the woman cooked was fit to eat. A jury is to decide if he wasn't malicious, and Oliver Randall is to defend him in court."

"Oliver Randall?" Sybil echoed the words as one who hears a familiar name yet seeks for the connection. It seemed so long ago. Then to show how utterly burned out the fire was, for her heart did not even flutter, she volunteered: "I was going to ask about him."

"Yes, indeed. He's lieutenant-governor of the State at present and slated for our next governor if he doesn't crack wide open at the critical moment. I've been one of his strongest supporters until now, but his recent attitude on certain public questions has disturbed those of us who look to him to show political sanity when it is needed. Each party is trying to outbid the other for popular favor and any one has merely to suggest a whim-wham to have it labelled a reform. Not that some reforms weren't needed; and consequently we've been passing through a state of turmoil. Things are going too fast for me, however, and no one would call me unduly conservative. I give away a lot of money, as you know, and seek to be patriotic and democratic—an up-to-date American. But as an owner of property and a respecter of traditions, frankly I'm alarmed." He stroked his beard nervously by way of showing how, with every wish to be dispassionate, he had become almost de-

spondent. "I forget, though, dear, you haven't been looking on. So you don't follow me, do you?"

Thereupon, in response to Sybil's smile which announced that she would be only too glad to understand if he would tell her, Henry proceeded to make a running commentary on the course of political events, describing how in the twinkling of an eye one of those clouds, no bigger than a man's hand, which appears from time to time on the Benham horizon, had proved the precursor of a cyclone of national scope which, in the form of the interplaying forces known as progressivism, social service, rescue of the under dog, and the new freedom had overspread the sky to the exclusion of everything else. In the wake of the tornado, which he agreed was beneficial at the start, old conceptions in regard to human rights and wrongs had been rooted up and their fallacy laid bare, new limits set to human greed, and the evangelizing dogma proclaimed in both market-place and forum that legislation, which had long been concerned with the protection of those who had, should henceforth concern itself with protecting those who had not. Though the wind, he continued, had blown from the same quarter with increasing velocity for a long period, there were no signs of abatement, with the result that people with anything to lose were holding fast to what they had and trying to look pleasant; even keeping up their courage by learning to whistle the ragtime political music to which the community was dancing. It seemed at times as if values had become so jumbled that vice was confounded with hard luck, and sturdy self-respect overshadowed by the craving to make pathetic excuses for everybody. "As for the woman who forgets herself" (that's the sort of phrase they use), he added, "she's almost on a pedestal; it's always some man's fault; she has a perpetual

champion in her steel-clad sister who, poised like the flying Mercury, proffers paradox and Bernard Shaw with one outstretched hand and invites to the tango with the other—and with the tip of her toe.”

Sybil relished and was set up by the admixture of criticism and raillery. As her ailments were more than half mental, she went far on her way to a cure in experiencing the desire to see for herself these transitions. It was a relief that her husband's dogmatism was tempered by a sense of humor which inclined her to accept his point of view as wholly convincing because palatable. She found herself saying with some zest:

“I hope you will go in for politics yourself some day. I'm sure you'd do very well.”

Henry shook his head in disclaimer of his availability. “That's not my line—except for making a liberal subscription. And if the bill passes limiting corporate and individual contributions, I shan't be useful even in that way.” But it was evident he was gratified and flattered that his wife had imagined such a future for him, thereby reanimating a dormant, shy ambition.

Sybil, putting two and two together, went on to say: “When I get well you must assert yourself. Other men with half your brains push ahead, command a following, and obtain high office.”

In her enthusiasm she sat bolt upright and disdained her pillows, something she had not attempted for months and months. Once more as in the days, which already seemed remote, when she had danced attendance on Oliver Randall's budding career and thrilled to his successes, content to believe what he believed, not because she knew exactly or much cared, but because his cause was hers on trust, she had already become a partisan eager for service. It did not matter that she did not wholly understand the complicated issues of the day;

this would come later. She was not troubled that she was about to espouse views in variance with her former ones. The behest behind the views had changed. She had been working then for Oliver Randall, now her allegiance was for her husband.

Nevertheless, this deliberately illogical consciousness had not impaired her clarity of vision. She was able to measure and appreciate the distinction between her devotees. Oliver was aggressive, brilliant, resourceful, a born leader. Henry's qualities were of more moderate range, mainly under cover as yet and distinguished only by good sense and tact. The comparison was one which put her on her mettle even while for a moment she searchingly reinvestigated the past. She meant to be absolutely loyal—but there had been a time when she would have followed the other man to the ends of the earth if only— That was the affair of her life; it always would be; but for the good of them both it was all over. Henceforth she might even be obliged to scheme against him, and for this their previous intimacy would be no disadvantage.

Thus facing the new dawn, Sybil asked casually, as one who has dropped a thread: "Explain to me a little further about Oliver Randall. What is it he has failed to do which he ought to have done?"

Thornton brought to book, proceeded to qualify: "Perhaps I went a little too far. Randall's all right; I realize he has to march with the procession. I don't quarrel with him either for keeping step to the music, for we've brought this trouble on ourselves. It has been his habit though to stand up in his boots and fight when he thought a thing wasn't fair. That's one of the characteristics which has enabled him to advance so rapidly. One would suppose the moment had arrived to cry halt and that private citizens with something

still left to lose as well as the big interests had been punished sufficiently for their shortcomings. We're ready to obey the law; all we ask is to have the firing stop and to let us transact business quietly. But no, at the convention the other day when he had a fine chance he didn't utter a single protest; on the contrary, seemed solely interested in preventing the other side from stealing a march in so-called progressive legislation. That made me solicitous and for the moment I'm disappointed in him. He's still our best hope, though, when all is said."

"I can hear him, 'It isn't a square deal,' " said Sybil musingly. A moment later she asked the question which was exercising her most: "Have they come together?"

"No, alas! Still unreconciled apparently."

"I had hoped——"

"So had all Mary's friends. And no one seems able to fathom the exact cause. I'd rather be on her side of course because—because, as you are aware, at one time there was no one I admired more."

"And you married an old-fashioned woman instead; an invalid into the bargain."

"I did it with my eyes open," he answered caressing her hand. "I don't mind being considered old-fashioned myself nowadays. Yes, loath as I am to say it, I'm disappointed in Mary. I sympathized with her aspiration as a woman to make the most of herself and when the chance came—the months when Oliver was down-and-out—I threw an opportunity in her way, glad to do her a favor even though what she produced should prove fit only for the scrap-heap."

"Oh Henry! It's fortunate she can't hear you say that. She believes you discovered her."

"Well, so I did. But if she hadn't been a pretty

woman I was once in love with, I wouldn't have bothered probably. As it turned out, I did discover her, for the things she designed for me were very clever and gave her her start. I was glad too to see her make the most of her success—cease to be an amateur and go in for the fame and the money there was in it professionally; but I never supposed she would end by leaving her husband in the lurch. Whatever Oliver has done to alienate her, as men go he was almost in a class by himself. Yet, now that she believes she can support herself and the children as a full-fledged architect, she cuts loose from the head of the family. Frankly it sobers me, for I prided myself on my readiness to aid and abet the woman of ideas, as I've just demonstrated. But here's a concrete case of what may happen when a fine woman becomes too self-centred. Besides, she quarrelled with you for standing up for him."

"Have you heard how she is doing professionally?"

"Nothing definite. But she cannot hope now to have her work judged by other than professional standards."

"She never wished it to be from the first, I'm sure. A suggestion to the contrary would horrify her. There's where you do her injustice, Henry. The fundamental difference between us is that I revel, as you know, in the luxury of doing nothing so well as a man. And the children? Have you run across them since the separation?"

Henry had not. He shook his head ominously. "And there's a further problem. She insists on keeping them; so the children have no father. That girl for instance—Christabel—she's bound to emulate her mother—to go her one step better if she can. But what's left for her? I repeat; I ask you to tell me what's left for her except to go stark naked?"

Sybil laughed softly. "Don't be ridiculous, my dear,

unless I'm really to think you the old foggy for which you're posing. Must I be forever reminding you that Mary is worth two of me intrinsically? I'm simply a relic; in another generation there won't be a woman like me left. Mary was on the right track, but she took the wrong turning—which ended in an oubliette. She's lying impaled at the bottom, but the real risk is that she'll bleed to death out of sheer obstinacy."

Thornton's specific tirade was but symptomatic of a general conviction that the pendulum had swung too far all along the line. His concern regarding the Randall episode was greater than his pride of opinion. Nevertheless, the concrete example served as a ripe text to reinforce the reluctant view that Mary was behaving badly. To Sybil these conversations served as a bridge between coma and reality; when she had crossed it, progress toward health became rapid. In a few weeks she had recovered her strength and a modicum of her former spirits. While insisting that she felt old and haggard, she regained her normal attitude to the extent of resuming the burden of existence with pleasing aptitude. Before the end of another six months she had established herself as a social leader by a series of entertainments, which neither the frivolous nor the knowing found dull, nor the conventional or exquisite inelegant. Her reward, as she mentally phrased it, was the pleasure which their success afforded her husband. By dint of emphasizing this she concealed from herself the zest of the game which led her on from one height to another in pursuit of something which might prove an anodyne to heart-hunger. She was almost ready to admit that she was enjoying herself, and in response to her quickening pulses she bloomed again to others' eyes if not to her own with the ampler but more luscious grace of the young matron free to gratify every fancy. Jewels and

beautiful clothes suited Sybil no less than she desired them. All ablaze in her finery and for the moment the rage, she drew from her world the compliment: "How her illness has developed her! She has become a much more interesting person." Lovely and a trifle worn, she abstained however from wearing her disaffection on her sleeve. Her face was a mask advertising the ambitious woman of the world; yet to the discerning her brilliant smile was meant to say: "I have sounded the depths of life; henceforth I am experience proof."

Meanwhile she kept track of what went on outside her circle with the selective eye of one whose time is not her own. Mary she did not meet; their paths never once crossed. But the essential thing to know—that the situation still remained unaltered—she gathered from what Barbara Ford and Mrs. Clifford Palmer let fall. These former friends gave her little enough information, and though they refrained from open attack, their air of chilly restraint showed unmistakably that they regarded her as responsible for the deadlock between Mary and Oliver which they deplored.

On the other hand, it would have been difficult to escape, even if she would, surface knowledge concerning Oliver Randall. During the months of Sybil's mounting ascendancy his name and frequently his face were so continuously in the public eye that ignorance of them was impossible. It was already not too much to say that no one's utterances on policy carried such weight as his, and by the end of another year, though he still continued to align himself with the radical wing of the party, it was every one's opinion that he had virtually secured the gubernatorial nomination. He had opened his mouth and cried halt; and at the very moment, as even

the reactionaries were ready to allow, when a resolute stand was most needed. This was at the outset of his second term as lieutenant-governor. He might have gone further to advantage—so Henry Thornton confided to his wife; yet the same critic swung up his cap with the rest, declaring that all factions had coalesced overnight as a result of the coup and that a new and seemingly impenetrable front had been established for a party hard-pushed and threatened with disruption.

The prevalent enthusiasm, expressed often under her own roof, would have been contagious in any case. Sybil, free to thrill without disloyalty, enjoyed the additional satisfaction of thinking, "I told you so," from which it was no great distance to the thought: "What a fool Mary was!" As various wonders and questions raced through her mind in regard to Oliver, his past, his present, and his future, it was easy for her gradually to ignore his apparent avoidance of her. When she compiled the lists for the ball which was to be her culminating social triumph, she easily persuaded herself to include his name. She was inviting everybody she knew to this, her crowning festivity, which was to include not only her social acquaintance, but the leading presentable public figures of the community, from any list of which he could not be omitted. He need not come; very possibly he would not. Chance had willed that she should never meet him face to face since the day of the catastrophe. Yet she could not candidly say that she had missed him. But now—she hoped he would come. She was curious to see him with a curiosity akin to desire.

On the night of the ball she knew that the question of his coming was in her constant thought and it was with rapidly beating heart she suddenly realized

that he was there. "His Excellency the governor—his Honor the lieutenant-governor—the governor's military staff." Following the announcement, a little cluster had formed around the door; the murmur of expectancy, stayed for a moment by her husband's welcome, was wafted to her while the ranks of the guests divided that the celebrities might meet their hostess. Then her wits flew to the rescue of her eyes and ears, arrested by the glint of approaching shoulder-straps and the clink of accoutrements, as she comprehended that the bluff-looking man in evening dress standing before her, ready to put his best foot forward, was the first citizen of the State. Sweeping him a courtesy, she rallied promptly all her charms in allegiance to her husband and the august proprieties.

Though the minutes seemed hours, all else was merged in her responsibility as a hostess. The governor after incipient awkwardness proved a gallant soul, easily captivated and disposed to attest his susceptibility by compliments and a disposition to linger. At last he moved on and she found herself looking into the familiar face. There he stood, the same as ever, yet different—erect, affable, clear-sighted with the curly hair clustering about his brow, but graver, maturer, less light-hearted. Was it melancholy or the concerns of state that had robbed him of his youth? He took her hand as if they had met yesterday; naturally, still with a shade of reserve which to her searching gaze seemed to say: "I'm here officially; and being here, I'm glad to see you again. The past is a closed book."

Yes, closed for both of them. He was altered; but was not like herself, middle-aged with no illusion left. He had before him what might prove a great career; his cue was sensible; they were both immune to temptation and must try to meet upon the footing of two

old friends. Beaming upon him through her mask of convention, as one flashes a new accomplishment, Sybil said: "I hoped you'd come. I wanted to congratulate you. Henry tells me you've saved the party. And I prophesied great things for you, didn't I?"

Taken aback by the audacious, fluent personal note, for an instant Oliver looked confused; he colored slightly. But his expression conveyed bewilderment rather than annoyance. Making what was almost a tragedian's bow in his manifest effort to compromise between stiffness and reciprocity, he replied: "You're very good. Yes, you always were encouraging; much more so than my merits justified." Formal words, yet reminiscent and far from a flat refusal to piece together the broken threads. But with this he strode on. The question whether he would return to her later harassed her as she turned to bestow a gracious welcome on the trio of epauletted aides. Then one by one in swift succession the other questions which had slumbered in the depths of her serenity rose like bubbles to the surface demanding an answer. Was he still miserable because of Mary? Contrite and faithful, was he eating his heart out, waiting to be taken back by the wife who had deserted him? Would he continue to wait? And in the interval had all other women ceased to exist for him? Had he been strictly faithful during the three long years he had kept aloof from her, she wondered? That would have been his rigid, righteous intention, she had no doubt. The other men of her acquaintance—the foreigners she had known—would have sought consolation elsewhere. It would have been their method for getting even with such a woman—if there were anywhere other women like Mary. "I should think more of him if he had," she found herself saying almost fiercely under her breath.

Would he come to speak to her later? The query danced in Sybil's brain as she stood, the vivacious centre of a circle which accorded her admiring homage and around which she flashed her preened loveliness as she performed her duties as hostess. She wondered what he thought of her in her new estate. Was it lost upon him that the frock she wore made all her previous finery that of a beggar maid? Had he failed to notice her wonderful pearls? Between her smiles she kept a nervous watch; but he did not even hover on the outskirts. Twice she caught sight of his tall figure through the vista of her trio of rooms on the far side of the maze of dancers, as though he sought to keep away as far as possible.

It was the ball of the season, there could be no question of that, the most sumptuous affair which Benham had ever attended. Old and young were enjoying themselves with a zest which conveyed to Sybil the intoxicating assurance that the princeliness of the festivity was not impairing its snap. A maze of couples was doing the new trot, all the rage. Elderly men, who had never danced before, or whose dancing days supposedly had long been over, vied with the young in pirouetting over the floor. This latest social fad, spawn of the underworld, smacking of salacious Eastern contortion and measured by ragtime melody—Sybil had been told she must allow it or her ball could not be a success. The worst features had been toned down, she was assured, and while it might be just a little vulgar, the young people were in love with it. What the young demand in the greatest republic of the world invariably prevails though all the proprieties be violated. If a coquettish young girl can overrule her mother by simulating a harlot without becoming one, so much the better lark. In the present instance what had been rigorously excluded

from municipal dance-halls had been insistently adopted by the ultrafashionable folk who prided themselves on their elegance and made the vogue, thus illustrating once more the growing native tendency to bridge over in the name of some new freedom the wide and ancient chasm which divides the chaste from the unchaste woman. It was not strange that Sybil, brought up in a world where social refinement is based on this distinction, should be a little puzzled. It was characteristic of her to concede the demands of the youthful element—for her ball must be a success; but the antics of her countrywomen still bewildered her. They were hard to reconcile with the ethics of Mary, who stood like an angel with a flaming sword demanding that men should toe the mark.

Supper was announced, and still Oliver had not returned, though the governor approaching under her husband's wing offered his arm to lead the way. When she reached the spacious refreshment-room her outlook from where she sat was screened by the stream of guests who availed themselves of this opportunity to exchange a few words with their hostess. At last there was a lull. She had given him up; and then suddenly she realized he was there and accosting her. His errand was heralded by his words; since she had expressed interest in the new attitude of the party, he had come to enlarge upon it.

The excuse was ample if he needed one. Nor did Sybil fail to observe that, though the moth had ventured within the orbit of the danger zone, he was so possessed by his theme that she might almost have been any one else. He could count upon her understanding and keeping pace with him; was not this the only reason why he was there? To all appearances her attire and her jewels were wasted upon him. Half fascinated, half

piqued, she watched him narrowly. His features had not lost in strength because the curves and spareness of youth had vanished. There was the same lustrous sparkle in his eyes when he was roused which had always challenged whoever would confound him with an easy-going politician. He had all the earmarks of a leader, from the fire of conviction to the indulgent smile which won friends upon the spot.

Had she lost her power over him completely? Was she nothing to him any longer but a woman who could listen sympathetically? So she asked herself as she plied her fan and hung upon his exposition. And if she was merely this, could she regain her hold—win him back if she tried? She pondered the doubt with an access of furtive curiosity which culminated in the counter-question—did she wish to try? She would be content to act upon his cue and begin afresh mere friends if only he seemed a little more alive to her existence, a little less engrossed by his political panacea. Of course she was flattered to be made privy to his plans, but after all they had parted lovers. Or was his indifference feigned? And could he be insisting on this academic vein in order to be near her, yet not betray himself? Sybil wondered; but she could not be positive; it might be either. At least it would be diverting to know if she could hold him, and he might be serviceable later. He was the coming man, and she might desire for Henry's sake to extract much from him later.

Here was a theme innocuous enough and ripe for broaching. She had been waiting for just such an opportunity and she must speak before they were interrupted. "There is something I want to consult you about," she interjected at the first pause. "I wish Henry to go into politics. You must make him. He would prove most efficient after he was broken in." Could he

help perceiving that she spoke eagerly as became a woman who was in love with her husband? She wished him to feel that. He stared a moment considering, before he said with evident surprise: "Why, we regard him almost as one of us already. He has supported the party most liberally."

"With his money, yes. What I mean is that I should like the party to do something for him when the occasion offers."

"He wishes office?"

"He would take it if it came to him unsolicited. I'm not sure that he knows that he wants it."

"I see," he answered with a smile. "It is you who are the practical politician."

"Is it a bargain?" she flashed at him.

"I will bear what you say in mind. I will sound him, and suggest his name when the opportunity presents itself. Come to think of it, there is likely to be a vacancy in his congressional district next autumn. Or he might prefer one of the minor places on the State ticket. Give me time; but I promise not to overlook him."

"Thank you so much. Henry is too ready to hide his light under a bushel." Then, to cap the propitious climax, for others were approaching, she added while no one was in ear-shot: "Come to see me and talk it over."

Sybil did not desire an answer; did not wait for one. It was sufficient that he had warmed to her proposal more definitely than she had any right to expect. The suggestion had appealed to him and he had let neither diffidence nor distrust limit his practical support. Nevertheless, as she turned away to greet the newcomers, she watched his face out of the corner of her eye; saw that the personal touch had reminded him of the past. He stiffened and colored slightly, she was sure of this; but

she helped him out by her assiduity elsewhere. She caught the impression of another tragedian bow, as if to vouch that he had refrained from committing himself. In another moment he had gone and was lost in the throng.

CHAPTER XXII

ONE afternoon in the late spring, five years after leaving her husband, Mary Arnold turned her footsteps in the direction of the Woman's City Club, her favorite resort in these days whenever she craved either relaxation or stimulus. On this particular occasion a further magnet lay in her candidacy—or rather in the opposition which had developed to it—for the presidency of the club. This opposition had taken the form of a rival ticket to that named by the nominating committee—an occurrence unheard of in the experience of the club. It had come as a surprise to Mary. That it had emanated from the reactionaries she understood perfectly well. For some time there had been rumblings below the surface inimical to the club policy; but the mention of her name for the highest office had been the signal for open disaffection, as to the precise significance of which she had misgivings. How far was it personal and how far merely a caveat filed by the timid, the conventional, and the unintelligent? Mary felt a painful curiosity on the subject which she desired to satisfy, although the result of the election, still a fortnight ahead, was a foregone conclusion. The ticket of the nominating committee was sure of a large majority; but certain remarks which had reached her ears, indicative of a lukewarm attitude on the part of some who were going to vote for her, invited analysis and verification.

The Woman's City Club, one of the first of similar organizations recently established in the large cities of

the country, was, as the name suggests, an endeavor on the part of democracy to break down the barriers of caste by bringing about a better mutual understanding between the various feminine groups and units of the municipality. It was designed to be a social clearing-house, where by means of personal contact under agreeable auspices and the interchange of opinions the feminine influence of the community might be welded into a cohesive yet elastic body for civil amity and usefulness. The experiment had been tried successfully in the case of men; why should it not prove equally successful in that of women? The indictment hitherto brought against all clubs by those who could not get into them has been their exclusiveness; the mission of the city clubs, both masculine and feminine, has been to unite as many as possible under a single roof for sociability's sake. And yet, though their strength lies in the miscellaneous quality of the membership, they must inevitably draw the line somewhere. It was not discovered until afterward that the French Revolution emancipated the bourgeoisie without doing much for the sansculottes. To the fastidious or contemplative the experience of relaxing under the same roof or on it (for the Woman's City Club of Benham had a roof-garden) with several thousand of one's fellow mortals, instead of a few speaking the same language, may not be unalloyed bliss however humanizing. Yet at the fiercely smoking altar of the brotherhood of man no extenuating circumstances are considered valid; every one must be a victim or disloyal to the spirit of the age, and even the motto, *nec Medea trucidet liberos coram populo*, is incessantly violated. But to the sower of new seed in search of a fruitful soil such an association cannot fail to be a positive boon.

Of all the clubs to which she belonged—and there

were several—Mary Arnold found this the most satisfying. It had been in existence seven years and she was one of the charter members. She had joined it two years before her separation from Oliver because its aims appealed to her and at the instance of Mrs. Clifford Palmer, one of the organizers. Too much preoccupied at first to make much use of the club or even to familiarize herself with its activities, she had formed the habit of dropping in there shortly after being thrown on her own resources. She had gradually become intimate there with various kindred spirits, women whose ideas and aspirations dovetailed with her own and in whose society she found not merely sympathy with her point of view but approval for the stand she had taken. They knew her story and believed that she had adopted the only self-respecting course.

The five years which had elapsed since she had been known as Mary Arnold instead of Mary Randall had been epochal, for they had ushered in a state of the public mind wherein all the standards of conduct which she had brandished ever since she had begun to think for herself had become oriflammes. She had seen a crusade develop almost overnight against the old-fashioned code of morality fostered by a man-protected world, and everything against which she had battled in private had been forced into the white light of publicity for censure and rectification. Moreover, women were responsible for it. A few men had helped, but the women were the real protagonists. To them was due the credit that the iniquities, which until yesterday were condemned only by a few ahead of their time, had aroused the conscience of the nation and promised to revolutionize all over the world the relations of men toward women.

So swift had been the transformation of public sentiment, so radical the trend of remedy, that at each stage

of the movement the words had been taken out of her mouth, as it were, before she had had time to utter them; a state of affairs which had made proselytizing a sinecure. As a body, the Women's City Club was not supposed to be partisan. It stood merely for social expansiveness and unity. But the function of one of its committees was to provide opportunities for listening to and discussing the vital issues of the day. From the vantage-point afforded her as a member of this committee, she had joyfully and assiduously catered to the current clamor for speakers and literature on the topics. Indeed her difficulty had been to keep abreast of the reform which was knocking away the underpinnings of one decaying landmark after another. Almost bewildered by the thoroughness of the reconstruction, she had beheld with joy her pet theories emerge in quick succession from the foundry, where the materials of the future were being fused and hammered into steel girders for immediate practical use by the men and women of to-day.

She had allied herself with those who advocated the teaching of sex hygiene in the schools and who proclaimed familiarity with the consequences of "the conspiracy of silence," as the best antidote to lust. She had favored the policy of stage production as a medium for riveting the attention of the public—especially of the adolescent—on the menace of horrors hitherto suppressed, and championing several plays which handled the consequences of immorality without gloves, but in a candid scientific spirit, she had attended the opening performances accompanied by both her children. She had addressed a legislative committee in aid of a measure to require the awful statistics hushed up by doctors in obedience to their professional code, registered by numerals if not by names (she herself preferred names).

And by way of safeguard she had jumped at the suggestion of a medical certificate as a condition of marriage. She should require this from Christabel's intended husband when the time came and should urge on her own son the obligation of anticipating such a requirement.

Non-partisan as was the City Club, she had seemed, in view of her activities, the logical candidate for president of those who liked to ride on the wave of advanced thought and wished the club to do so. Only the other day their number had appeared legion; so effusive a majority as to render the voice of dissent inaudible. It had been heard to be sure intermittently during the period when these reforms were making headway. The innovation of calling unpleasant things by their right names—shouting them from the housetops, as one objector put it—had provoked a murmur of repugnance from several quarters. So too the proposal to tell young people all about themselves had engendered a perplexity culminating in more or less disapproval. The only approach to a real division of opinion had resulted from the propaganda for the production of the unsavory plays. While the wisdom of this specific was hotly challenged by a considerable faction, the quality of the opposition—the squeamishness of the “nice” people, most of whom were reactionaries by temperament—had minimized the force of the protest at the time.

Simultaneously with the report of the nominating committee, the temperature of the atmosphere had changed. To begin with, positive disaffection had replaced the complete political harmony which had reigned so long as to justify the hope that the club was the chosen organ of destiny to realize the millennium. The clique of Mary's opponents made up in fervor for what it lacked numerically; but, as has been indicated, not

their activities but the irresolute attitude of her supporters had made her sober. In the same breath with the announcement of her nomination a sort of chilliness had permeated their ranks, the symptoms of which were apathy and a disposition to whisper behind her back. Impalpable so far as overt acts the opposition was, to be sure, but she had nevertheless become aware of it. They were going to elect her president; but her desire to fathom the cause for the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the friends whose fealty until lately had been so spontaneous was the true incentive of her visit to the club this afternoon.

As Mary passed through the large entrance-hall after depositing her wraps, she espied a young woman who had preceded her from the cloak-room by a few steps in the act of entering the only room where smoking was permitted. She had already recognized her as Virginia Vose, one of the younger members, barely twenty-five but already a favorite of hers because of the ardor with which she had espoused the crusade in aid of social purity. In order to detain her before she escaped, Mary hastened across the hall, and the girl, turning at her approach, accorded her a vivacious smile from the lips which held the cigarette she was about to light.

"Why, Mrs. Arnold, you're the very person I was longing to see. We had such a discussion last night on the burning question. I did my best, but I only wish you had been there to champion the cause."

"You must tell me about it, Virginia. And I was hoping to meet you also. Come and have tea in the lounge."

Virginia with a piteous cock of the head exhibited her cigarette. "Would you mind just for once taking it in here? I've been toiling for hours and I'm dying for a smoke." An engaging young woman of mercurial

temperament and fashionable affiliations, quick-witted, lithe, and nervous, she might readily have impressed Mary that she was as volatile as her flyaway hair but for the maturity of her opinions on serious subjects.

Mary had never been inside the smoking-room, and she had been opposed to this concession to the smokers. But the force of the argument—why should a man indulge in tobacco and a woman abstain from its use?—had taken off the edge of her disapproval where her own sex was concerned. Her husband had smoked like a furnace; and if any woman wanted to—it was her own affair. Knocking about at clubs had made her more liberal, provided that sauce for the goose was made sauce for the gander.

"Very well," she said reluctantly, "since you would be miserable without it. But I must leave word at the office where Mrs. Ford will find me if she comes in."

This accomplished, Mary returned to find Virginia in a cosey corner deep in a book which she had extracted from her reticule, and shrouded in smoke.

"Do you inhale?" Mary inquired.

"It wouldn't be any fun if I didn't. But I'm frightfully moderate since I went in so hard for work. This is only my sixth to-day—which is next to nothing." Whereupon, to emphasize her moderation, Virginia threw away the attenuated stub and proceeded to light her seventh.

"As in everything else more or less injurious, I suppose quantity is an individual equation."

"I used too many at first, I admit. But when it comes to insisting, as so many do, that women are injured more than men—because they're not able to stop when they get going—I believe it's a base libel."

Mary bridled at the remark. "That's one of those threadbare fallacies which the people who don't think

are fond of circulating. Men doctors are not above using it as a bugaboo. There are self-indulgent women as well as men; but if the rank and file of women ever decide to smoke, they won't be afraid of the comparison." Then as the tea-things were placed between them, she added: "Now tell me about your discussion."

"Oh yes, and it started with that." Virginia in her eagerness sat upright, so that her book slid from her lap to the carpet. "You know Oscar Fenn, don't you? Well, no matter; it was he who revived the taunt that women can't be trusted to do the same things as men because they are sure to overdo. I didn't agree and we got scrapping, with the result that we presently drifted to the subject which every one is talking about—how men can be forced to behave. It was at the Hamilton Fords'. There were half a dozen present, but Oscar and I did most of the talking until Mr. Ford butted in. I took for granted he was buried in his newspaper, but I should have said the same under any circumstances. He's a great friend of yours, isn't he? And such a nice man, I always supposed. I supposed he was one of us."

"But he is, unless he's very much changed."

"Well, I had taken up the cudgels and was insisting there's no more excuse for men going wrong than women, except that we've been hedged about with conventions in the past; and that now that most conventions are abolished, the blame for immorality ought to be apportioned equally, and not as at present borne wholly by the woman. 'Do you mean,' asked Oscar, 'that you consider their temptations are the same?' 'I certainly do,' said I. 'There's no more excuse for the one than the other, and I've the best of reasons for saying so.'"

As Virginia paused a moment to tuck a refractory strand of hair into place and pat the lobe of her ear,

Mary was moved to interject: "You don't mean that Mr. Ford disagreed with you?"

"I certainly do, and out of a clear sky. He put down his newspaper and said emphatically: 'I beg to differ from you, young lady.' Then he added, as if he didn't know whether to be more astonished or irate: 'Do you mind giving me your authority?' It was rather awkward, for they all pricked up their ears of course, and he is old enough to be my father. But I stood to my guns. 'With the greatest pleasure,' said I. 'From a very competent doctor.' This seemed to break him up more than ever. 'And how, if I may ask,' he inquired, 'did you happen to be discussing such a subject with a doctor?' That was cunning of him, wasn't it, Mrs. Arnold? He really seemed to think it was extraordinary."

"Go on," said Mary, who was in no mood for philosophical by-play.

"Of course I broke it to him as gently as I could that no one hesitates longer to speak of anything to anybody—especially of the things which affect one personally; that the rising generation has no false modesty, and that women can't afford to beat about the bush as formerly to ascertain what they need to know. I appealed to Oscar to corroborate me, and though he tried to duck, he couldn't deny it. After this we went at it hammer and tongs—Mr. Ford and I. He chiefly raved; said I was all wrong, that I wasn't competent to judge, and that the doctor had either been stringing me or was trying to flatter me. Just fancy. Finally, when he found he couldn't convince me in the least, he gave the newspaper a vicious pitch and began to walk up and down the room declaiming. 'It's about time,' he said, 'for the men to get busy and stop this sort of thing. We've reached the limit.' And all be-

cause of poor little me. He got so fiendy finally that Mrs. Ford—she's a dear if there ever was one—went up and put her arms around his neck, so as to stop him by a kiss. 'They'll think you're in earnest, Ham dear, if you go on like that.' She tried to make us believe that his bark was worse than his bite, but he shook her off, exclaiming: 'I'm dead in earnest. What are we coming to when young unmarried girls prattle about the relative—' but his wife clapped her hands over his mouth before he could finish, and sat him down in a chair. As if I wasn't just as competent as any one to find out what the doctors think. If Mr. Ford goes off at a tangent like that, I don't wonder that his cook sued him for defamation of character. Why, here comes Mrs. Ford now."

It was indeed Barbara advancing from the doorway, looking happy, prosperous, and well-dressed. To Mary, hankering for comfort, this report of Ham's peculiar behavior, after all allowances for exaggeration were made, was disconcerting, and she welcomed the sight of her friend. A heart-to-heart talk between them would either dispel or confirm her reluctant suspicion that the rival ticket represented a change of club sentiment which was partly personal.

"They told me I should find you here, though I could scarcely credit my ears."

"I was weak enough to indulge this exhausted young woman by taking tea where she could smoke."

"Do have one, Mrs. Ford," said Virginia, holding out her cigarette-case. "If you don't smoke already, I'm sure it would help when composing a poem or working out an intricate situation."

Barbara shook her head. "My muse would fly out of the window at the advent of lady nicotine. But I'll have some tea, thank you, if it isn't cold." Thereupon,

her foot encountered an obstacle, and stooping she picked up Virginia's book from the carpet. Glancing mechanically at the title, she darted a glance of surprise at the owner and said: "You're reading this?"

The glance was not lost on the young woman. "Strong food for babes—that's what you're thinking, I can see. But no modern girl is a babe any longer, Mrs. Ford. She can't afford to be. Mrs. Arnold and I were just comparing notes on the subject. On the freedom to discuss everything, I mean, not on 'Madame Bovary.' I've read only half of it. So far it's not dreadful at all. Emma's getting bored with Charles, and I'm rather sorry for her. It's a famous book; and, as the men think nothing of reading it, why should I?"

"Yes, it's a masterpiece in its way," said Barbara dryly. "Only—you haven't finished it yet."

Mary was too impatient to be alone with Barbara to enter into the discussion, but she was struck by her note of conservatism as being foreign to her customary lack of squeamishness. Barbara was in the habit of reading what she chose; as a writer, life was an open book for her, and it seemed almost out of character that she should take Virginia to task for reading what she had admittedly read herself. The girl's retort that no young man would think anything of reading it seemed pertinent to Mary. She held no brief for pornographic literature; she read French novels chiefly for the purpose of acquiring facility in the language, and her acquaintance with them was not extensive.

Barbara did not pursue the subject, but branched off summarily to compare notes with Virginia on some committee work in which they were both interested. Meanwhile Mary, occupied with sending for another cup and preparing Barbara's tea, asked herself if Barbara were becoming timid at the twelfth hour. Could

it be that just as her girls were nearing the age for living up to the new freedom, she was running to cover with victory in sight? There was something in Barbara's manner toward Virginia which hinted at this, notwithstanding her endeavor to suppress Ham. And how account for the latter's recreancy on any hypothesis except such a change of front?

No sooner had Barbara deposited her cup and declined the proffer of a second than Mary rose and said: "Come, dear, Virginia knows we've a lot of things to say to each other, so we'll leave her to her cigarettes and her book."

After they were in the hall Barbara remarked: "Virginia's clever and spirited, but isn't it possible to know too much at her age? It can't be other than disillusionizing at twenty-five to see life stripped naked."

Mary was moved to reply: "I don't see why the truth shouldn't be wholesome at any age."

"Wholesome?" Barbara echoed the word as if she found difficulty in associating it with what was in her mind. "She spent last evening at our house and the discussion of the double standard between her and Oscar Fenn reached a point where Ham flared up, threw down his newspaper, and contradicted one of her assertions so savagely that I was afraid she would be upset. But she didn't appear either disconcerted or convinced."

So it was true that Barbara was affecting conservatism at the instance of maternal timidity and Ham was abetting her. As they entered the lounge Mary led the way to the embrasure of a window, where they were unlikely to be disturbed. "Let's sit down here. I regard Virginia Vose as a very intelligent girl—but don't let's talk about her. It's ages since I've had a quiet talk with you, my dear. And there's something I'm depending on you to tell me. What's the secret behind the op-

position to my candidacy? What is it that the club is saying about me under its breath?"

"The secret? I have supposed the opposition to be very self-evident. Mrs. Spencer, a reactionary from the cradle, is the ringleader, and it represents her following, outside of which scarcely any one will vote against you, and you're sure to be elected," said Barbara fluently.

"That's not what I mean. It goes without saying that Mrs. Spencer's opposition is rather complimentary than otherwise, just as it would be to you—and I expect to be elected. I hoped you'd understand. I'll put it another way. What are my friends saying? Why is it that they've lost their confidence in me?"

"Lost their confidence in you, yet choose you president? That's a preposterous notion to get into your head. I never knew you, Mary, to be hipped about anything before." Barbara's protest was spontaneous, nevertheless she colored slightly and seemed to Mary to avoid her gaze.

"I can see you know. There are times, Bab, when one's best friend can remain loyal only by becoming candid. Why is it that everything—progressive in the club should suddenly collapse with my nomination?"

"Collapse? That's far too exaggerated a word," said Barbara as she fixed her soft dreamy eyes on her friend in response to this plea for frankness.

"Droop then, subside; we won't haggle over phraseology. It is the attitude of my friends, Barbara, that has altered. My enemies are just as well-defined and negligible as ever."

Barbara paused a moment, for it needed both moral courage to confirm what Mary had divined and discretion so as not to convey more than was true.

"I suppose I know what you mean—and yet it's nothing tangible. That is, I've never acknowledged as

much to myself until you just challenged me; and being so fond of you, I should naturally have been susceptible in your behalf. Well, you know how disposed some people are to pick flaws when a candidate is running for office. I've heard several who were friendly to you repeat the comment—which emanated from one of the other side—that it was unfortunate we were to have a president with two names."

"Two names? What did they mean by that?" Then comprehending, she added with a touch of dignity: "My name is Mary Arnold."

"But not your legal name. At least that's what they assert."

Mary flushed with annoyance. "I've the right to call myself by any name I choose. Every one in the club knows my name and so addresses me. It's a quibble and narrow-minded to raise such an objection merely because I'm not divorced."

"It wouldn't have occurred to me, and it was scarcely urged as an objection. They merely said it was unfortunate. It seems that whoever made the original criticism added that the club would have to reprint the catalogue if you were to return to live with your husband while you were in office—which was just plausible enough to bear repetition. You know how such remarks spread."

"But from my point of view it's—cruel. Of course I shall withdraw my name."

"That would be making mountains out of the smallest of mole-hills. It's simply this way, Mary. Other things being equal, the club would be likely to select as president a woman who was living with her husband, if she had one. But other things weren't equal, so they united on you. You were and are, dear, the obvious person."

"They regard it as a blemish then that I do not live

with mine—even though my friends have told them that my separation is final?”

“Blemish is too positive a word. What can’t be helped isn’t a blemish. But they’re sorry.”

“Sorry? You mean they’d like me to condone in my individual case the sort of thing the club virtually condemned when it nominated me for president? One would suppose by their choice they approved of me for being steadfast. Yet—as I intimated just now—there’s been a cooling off toward me and toward what the ticket was supposed to stand for.”

“That’s largely imaginary on your part in both cases,” Barbara protested. “We’ve been going ahead very fast along certain lines, and a mild reaction was due. Radical as I am, I find myself wavering when it comes to carrying out all the new reforms. As to being steadfast, you must be well aware that your friends admired you unreservedly for the stand you took.”

“Not unreservedly—that’s the very point. Or, if they did, they’ve changed. You’ve admitted as much, Barbara. It’s not a blemish—but they’re sorry. Sorry for what, then?”

“I suppose it’s mainly this: Of course they’d rather see you and Oliver reunited.”

“But that’s impossible. You and they should know it well.”

“That’s what they’re sorry for, and I too, Mary—that it is impossible. For in other respects he has done so splendidly.”

Waxing braver as she proceeded, Barbara realized from the glint of Mary’s eye that she had floundered at the close.

“What difference does that make if, in the only way which counts to a woman, he has been faithless?”

“Yes, I know. I’m not defending him. I’m not even

urging you. I told you because you asked. The reserve you spoke of consists of nothing but the hope that you may see your way to going back some day."

"That is, patch up a hollow truce for appearance's sake—for club appearance's sake."

"Oh no, dear. What I meant was that you would feel you must go back; that you couldn't keep away from him any longer. That of course is the only way it could happen."

In her eagerness to elucidate her meaning, Barbara became a little tremulous. She turned her head away to hide the emotion which had suddenly gripped her. She had been urged to be frank, yet the requisite frankness bordered on a liberty. Yet now that she had conquered her diffidence and crossed the Rubicon, this flag of weakness reinforced her words as nothing else could have done and fluttered appealingly. To Mary the emphasis of the discussion seemed suddenly shifted. A moment before she had been tilting at an inconsistency which must be satisfactorily accounted for if her name was not to be withdrawn. Now all else seemed surplusage except the need of replying to this heartfelt invitation to analyze her present happiness and justify it—an invitation which put her on her mettle, yet in danger of becoming misleadingly lachrymose.

"I'm thankful you realize that. But I thought you also understood my love died absolutely at the moment we separated. There's no room for resurrection—for there's nothing left to fan. And so——"

Why did her voice crack at the moment when she wished it to be most steady? Once and for all she must make plain the impregnability of her attitude. But before she could feel certain of her tricky nerves she heard Barbara try to help her.

"I think I understand, Mary."

"I want to be very sure you do. That answers them, I mean. They oughtn't to be disappointed beyond the point that they're sorry it can't be otherwise."

"That's all it is; that's all I ever said it was," exclaimed Barbara effusively and leaning forward, "They're simply sorry—sorry for you."

It seemed like arguing in a circle but for the emphasis on the last word, which conveyed a fresh if unintentional challenge.

"Sorry for me?" she echoed, without endeavoring to suppress her surprise. The kernel of the reservation regarding her was disclosed as a conspiracy of lip-to-lip commiseration. They wanted her to go back, and because she couldn't go back they pitied her all the more. Their insinuation was that a woman not merely missed something essential if she was obliged to live apart from her husband, but that she ought to bankrupt herself in self-respect in order to return to him. Mary could not refrain from asserting her dignity. "I thought my heart was broken at the time—and it was. But my life since then has been very full. I am fortunate in my children. My time is fully occupied. Some honors have come to me. Except when I dwell on it, my married life seems far away and not—so broadly satisfying as that which I live now."

She paused abruptly, forewarned of the recurrence of the treacherous, inexplicable sob in her voice. Her concern regarding the changed attitude of the electorate of her club must have unhinged her without her knowledge. But happily she had uttered without faltering all that she had intended.

Her words produced a corrective effect on Barbara. "Don't imagine for an instant, Mary, that we don't appreciate how splendidly you've managed and what a wide range of interests you have." Then, as if to

exonerate herself from setting up an inferior standard, she added: "You mustn't think I'm urging you to do anything which would lower you in your own eyes. You've always been a stimulus to me, dear, and you will never be anything else."

They talked a while of other things and kissed each other affectionately at parting. Nevertheless, as Mary went her way, the cloud returned which had momentarily lifted. She had promised not to withdraw her name, but she felt far from serene. Barbara's affection was manifest as ever, but their interview had served merely to confirm her previous impression; to diagnose the nature of the silent criticism without dissipating it. The reaction in club sentiment might be a coincidence, but there was no escape from the consciousness that the support of her friends was tinged with a sentimental regret that she was unable to revive her love for Oliver—an attitude so inconsistent with their earlier professions as to be discomfiting despite its lack of logic. It was clear that Barbara was speaking for them all; and that this included Ham. Ham, whom she had looked on hitherto as the staunchest of her supporters notwithstanding he had never broken with Oliver, and whose insurgency as reported by Virginia Vose she had hoped might be fortuitous rather than chronic.

This probability—that Barbara was speaking for Ham—concerned her most as she turned her steps toward home. The proximate result of Ham's silent censure had been that the two men had seen comparatively little of each other since the separation. They met occasionally and had not ceased to be friendly, but they were no longer intimate in the old sense. If it had occurred to her at one time to require that Ham should choose between Oliver and her, she had refrained from

asking too much of him, because aware of the distinction which he chose to draw between the actual sin and what had been intended. She had been willing to make this concession to the freemasonry between men in return for his sympathetic approbation. She could have wished that he had selected some other lawyer to defend him in the lawsuit instead of going straight to Oliver, but the assertion that there was no one in whom he had equal confidence as a cross-examiner—and of course he was in a disagreeable fix—had acquitted him of disloyalty toward herself. But on what grounds could he be now harboring disappointment at her inability to blow life into cold ashes? Why had he joined the league against her, the basis of which appeared to be gratuitous pity?

The trial—three years ago of this curious suit for damages brought by his cook against Ham—had served in a sense to widen the gulf between her and Oliver. She had gone to court because the matter touched the Fords so closely and seemed to impugn the theory that a man could keep house as well as a woman if circumstances required (not better as Ham vaingloriously put it). The alleged libel contained the statement that the plaintiff could not even boil an egg, which if privileged was claimed to be malicious, and the issue was rendered uncertain by the opportunity afforded to the jury to assess damages against a husband who had made himself ridiculous by usurping feminine duties. The risk was that the courageous pioneer might be sacrificed on the altar of old-fashioned prejudice.

Here had been her point of contact with the trial. In the retrospect which her state of mind had forced upon her she lived it over as she walked from the club toward home. This was the first time she had been close to Oliver during three years since their separation—

and now another two years had passed. She had been able to observe and listen to him at first with a curious sense of detachment, as if being no longer responsible for him, it was for him to create his own impression upon her like any other attorney. She was prepared for the clear analysis, accompanied by good humor, which almost seemed to wink at the jury, when the plaintiff was on the stand; it was a lawyer's function to be plausible, and by the test of past events Oliver's voice was always ingratiating. She had listened attentively, but almost as to a stranger until the moment when midway in his closing argument he had begun to draw a graphic picture of the Ford domesticity and to glorify it as the forerunner of a new matrimony. Henceforth—he bade his auditors believe—a new order of things was to govern the relations between husband and wife, which would determine the bread-winner by fitness and apportion the field of usefulness for each according to his or her capacities. It was a leaf from her own book. She might have said the same almost word for word had she been standing in his shoes before the electrified jury.

In her astonishment she had turned hot and cold. Was it not the irony of fate that he should be utilizing in another's behalf beatitudes, allegiance to which would have saved his own domestic life from shipwreck? It seemed as if every sentence he uttered proceeded from the depths of his heart, and yet what was he except the play-actor, the clever lawyer who had donned a disguise to meet the exigencies of his case and win it? And the bitterness of it—a fresh affront to her agonized spirit—was that the truth which could have kept them united was no sealed book to him, but open, pondered, and digested. He had no longer even the excuse of ignorance; he had understood all along; hence so much the greater was his perfidy.

He won the case, and while Ham warmed to him on the spot, she had slipped from the court-room. His eloquence seemed smothered by its rank hypocrisy. She had steeled her heart anew, but on the morrow when she awoke a strange thought had offered itself. Could it be that he had read the book only when too late; that, aware of her presence, he had been pleading his own cause with the intensity of one who has just grasped the truth? She had hugged the idea for an instant, then put it away from her almost angrily as fantastic. Contrition could not obliterate the past, and if she was not entirely happy, nothing he could do would ever make her so.

His voice pregnant with conviction came back to her now as she reviewed the three years which had elapsed since the trial. Again she asked herself what reason she had for thinking his conversion other than a pose or how the situation would be altered if it were not. As Barbara had said, he had done splendidly in the eyes of the world ever since. But he was outside her life. She had watched his public progress ungrudgingly, but the essential thing in a man to a woman like herself was character. A man might be President of the United States and yet fail in her eyes. Oliver as lieutenant-governor was on the road to higher honors. She had no doubt of this, and she was glad. But of his private life since their separation she knew nothing. The children were sent to visit him at stated intervals at his request, but she had been unable to conceal from them the cause why she lived apart from their father; another woman, she had let it go at that. With Sybil as Mrs. Thornton she had no relations, and she had never condescended to inquire whether she and Oliver continued to meet. On that phase of her life she had closed the door. The invitation to reopen it and dally with the past in or-

der to exonerate herself from being pitied would be grotesque but for Barbara's admission that it must be spontaneous. Barbara had given her the correct clew to the apathy of her friends who had connived at the easiest way. Easy for them, but it would be for herself capitulation as to everything she had been vindicating all these years. If she felt like crying, if her voice would still choke were she obliged to speak, it might be partly her nerves, but it was principally resentment. The defection of her friends had angered her, gently as it came from the lips of Barbara. What they tendered her as a stimulus to happiness was retrograde, not toward the light.

Drying her eyes, Mary proceeded with a more elastic step. The site of the club was central and the first third of the mile and a half between it and her apartment lay within the shopping district. It was the closing hour, and from every intersecting street a stream of humanity, largely women, the myriad employees of the stores and commercial offices, was pouring into the broad avenue she trod, swelling the tide which flowed with or faced her. As she inhaled the crisp air which seemed an ally in the revolt of her readjusted faculties, she kindled at her contact with this army of her own sex, the ranks of struggling, industrious femininity in which she was a unit. Women of all degrees and ages—lithe and portly, light-hearted and demure, captivating and insignificant—she read on each of their tired yet eloquent faces the perpetual problem of happiness based on self-respect; that whatever their limitations or shortcomings none sought it at heart on any other condition. So numerous and diversified were they that to her eye the few men seemed blotted out of the procession; and yet the woof of every one of all these lives was interwoven with that of men—usually of some one man with whom either con-

sciously or unconsciously she was struggling for recognition. To this resolute, silent struggle of the new generation she could not prove recreant—she who had aspired to lead and blaze the way. Her contemporaries might pity her if they chose, but this procession proved beyond peradventure who had been undiscerning, she or they.

Heartened by the association, Mary sped along like a graceful ship under full sail, careening to her impulse. As she turned the corner of a street which branched from the thoroughfare at an angle toward home, she suddenly became aware that a man, as he passed, was smirking in her face with lecherous complacency, the import of which was unmistakable. His signal said as plainly as could be that he would fain accost her for an evil purpose, and that he was fatuous enough to hope she would reciprocate his advances.

For the moment she was the only woman on the sidewalk. Hitherto—for this was far from the first time she had been the victim of such an indignity—she had been content to drop her eyes and turn her head away despite disgust, in obedience to the instinct of safety. But this invasion of her exalted mood was so abhorrent that she could not forbear to flash upon her insulter a glance of withering scorn bristling with sheer repugnance. The next instant she was beyond and rid of him, but the episode served to set the seal on her state of mind. Here was a typical instance of what was happening thousands of times a minute on the public streets of the civilized world. No woman of prepossessing appearance, however modest, was immune from the leer of licentiousness. But bestial as was the design, its sting was the taking for granted that success was possible. This rankled in Mary's bosom as, with head aloft and brow aflame, she breasted the freshening breeze looking neither

to right nor left. It could only mean that those who would respond were still so plentiful that libertines could afford to run the risk of such a rebuke as she had administered. The procession which she had just left behind seemed suddenly tarnished by the humiliating deduction. The indignant charge that all men were at heart brutes in disguise was glossed over by this appalling complicity. Here was the one sin in the world which seemed to baffle and defy every precaution, as if the majority of both sexes were in secret conspiracy. The sin which, having wrecked her life because of her steadfastness, now lifted its hideous head to mock at her not only through the boldness of its votaries, but the condonation of her dearest friends.

Perplexed and crestfallen, Mary hurried through the gathering dusk, heedless of all save the pavement ahead of her, until familiar landmarks announced that she was nearly home. Her fondness for the locality had grown upon her. The district had prospered amazingly without losing its original character. Rents had risen slightly, but it remained the region of all others in the city consecrated to light housekeeping. The inference from its growth seemed to be that more and more people were desirous of living in a flat where devotion to ideas was not constantly fettered by manual exigencies which were here reduced to a minimum, and the neighborhood seemed to her to epitomize the best hopes of democracy in a sense which no other quarter of Benham did.

Mary reached the entrance of her apartment at the same moment as a figure advancing from the opposite direction, in whom she recognized a fellow lodger, the one man of all his sex whom she felt ready at the moment to except from her category of distrust. Through propinquity—he occupied the opposite suite on the

same landing—she had gradually drifted into terms of pleasant intimacy with Mr. Bartlett, who now addressed her genially: "Good evening, Mrs. Arnold. It's an odd coincidence that we should meet to-night, as what I am carrying would prove to you." A medium-sized man and nondescript save for his shrewd deep-set eyes and amiable smile, he exhibited as he spoke a small flat package and added: "Guess what it is."

Mary did not try, but ingratiatingly shook her head. His greeting was an antidote to her gloom. She had learned to like Mr. Bartlett, without exactly knowing why. He was plain in speech though incisive, kindly but lacking in social polish; their friendly relations were the gradual outcome of his having taken a fancy to her children. Rumor said that he had accumulated enough in business to enable him to retire and live modestly, that he had some connection with politics and was a bachelor. She suspected that he was rather lonely. He had no callers, and he seemed to enjoy dropping in to see them occasionally, but did not overdo it.

"I was passing a shop-window to-day," he continued, "and a picture caught my eye. Going in, I said to the attendant: 'Let me look at that,' and I asked the price. It happened to take my fancy. Then I examined the signature in the corner, and it was yours. When I repeated the name aloud, the clerk spoke up: 'You know the artist then? She's an architect by profession, I believe, but she does these sketches in between times, and they're popular.' 'I should think they would be,' I answered, and I told him to do it up. I'm going to decorate my wall with it."

"It's a real compliment because you didn't know it was mine, and when you found out were all the better pleased," Mary answered. "And may I add, Mr. Bartlett," she said as he held open the door for her to en-

ter, "that you've cheered me up already. I was coming home rather out of conceit with things in general, and it's better than a cup of tea to encounter so appreciative a friend."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE presidency of the City Club was admittedly a blue ribbon; the right to wear it marked the recipient as one of the locally successful women of her day. Yet to be invited in the same breath to wield the gavel and to search her own heart was an anomaly which continued to haunt Mary after she had taken office and given her followers to understand that they had rested on their oars long enough. Her success in dispelling the stagnation she had detected was immediate, but the process of plumbing the depths of her own soul did not supply either the serenity or the reassurance she had hoped for.

Mary had prided herself all her life on her gift of introspection; but it had never been so deliberate. The imputation that happiness was within her reach, and that her failure to grasp it was due to something lacking in herself which fostered covert pity, obliged her to analyze her state of mind relentlessly.

Why talk of happiness? She had not pretended to be happy since the break in her married life. Her husband's perfidy had inflicted a mortal wound which precluded the hope of any but a maimed existence. But to put the best face on this and her best foot forward, extracting from life much that was satisfying through devotion to her career and her children, had enabled her to believe that she was happy. Like many another who could not have all she would, she had made the most of what she had, heartened meanwhile by the thought that she was serving her day and generation

as a pioneer. Hitherto, whenever she had felt disconsolate, tired, sick at heart—and there had been these moments—she had drunk again at the spring of sex fealty and derived fresh courage and impetus.

It was the estimate which other women had of her, coupled with her own able-bodied purpose to look neither to right nor left, which had sustained her. Now some of them would have it she was mistaken as to what they thought of her. This would seem to signify they had changed their minds—and simultaneously she was bidden to look both to right and left in order to make sure that her love could not be resuscitated. Why should they suppose it could be? She had put Oliver so completely out of her life that she knew nothing of his daily doings. Nevertheless from behind the text of Barbara's reluctant candor peeped the insinuation that she not only ought to miss him but did miss him. It was as if she was accused of incapacity to gauge her own emotions.

The gravity of the charge lay in the consciousness that, if she were self-deceived, there would be no cure but humiliation, a specific so abhorrent that the mere idea of it rankled. If they were in earnest they were absurd. To admit that they were not ridiculously in error would be to confess herself a failure and all her tenets fallacies. She was a woman in evidence before her contemporaries redressing their wrongs, but the problem was also personal. She was herself and her individual pride was involved. There was no better way to prove their suspicion groundless than by taking down the shutters which proclaimed her isolated and letting Oliver into the chamber of her thoughts. She was not afraid to think of him. She was ready to renew her familiarity with all he was and represented, and visualize him just as he stood.

Having fixed on this method of retaliation, and bent her mind upon it, Mary found with some surprise that despite the shutters and averted eyes there was little left for her to learn; that somehow, without intending to, nothing had escaped her and she possessed exact knowledge of his public doings, his political speeches, and even of his private life. She had gathered for instance that he did not visit Sybil. Not that it mattered. She even had a definite impression that he lived a secluded, lonely existence on the threshold of which no woman ever appeared. This might be so or not; it was his own concern. She had ceased to be responsible for his morals.

Yet it did not dawn upon her that her investigation was superfluous until in the very act of drawing upon the two sources at her fingers' ends, her children and her fellow tenant, Mr. Bartlett; an artifice which proved so barren of results as to convict her of having pumped them dry already under the guise of sheer indifference. The answers for which she waited to her sly but deliberate questions were such a twice-told tale that she felt rueful. They must have talked of Oliver and she have listened without realizing it. Both Arnold and Christabel went to see their father once a week. She had consented to the arrangement as a compromise, much as she would have preferred a sterner course. Ham had come to her predicting with his gravest face that Oliver would burn all his bridges and invite publicity rather than yield on this point, and that the courts—still the creatures of a man-made world—would back him up. So she had told them the tragedy, never mentioning the name of his accomplice, but leaving them to guess if they could. Christabel had surmised at once, but Mary was not sure that her son ever had. She had never refused to listen to what they chose to tell her of these visits, but she had

purposely abstained from questioning them and she had fancied her manner to be one of discouragement—as if it suited her better not to hear. There had been moments even when she had found Arnold's exuberance over his father's political fortunes hard to bear. His youthful vision was dazzled by the gewgaw of newspaper publicity, rousing rallies, and campaign fireworks. Yet she must have paid closer attention to the details than she supposed—strange as it was.

In the case of Stephen Bartlett it had not transpired until recently that he knew Oliver, and it had never occurred to her that she was utilizing the rather dramatic circumstance of his ignorance as to who she was as a stalking horse for curiosity. The original allusion had been accidental—contemporary with Oliver's nomination as lieutenant-governor—and coming from one of the opposite political faction, she had listened to it in the hope that it might not be altogether complimentary. A rent here or there in what passed for praiseworthiness would comport more logically than a fair public exterior with the moral obliquity she had put her finger on. Here was a partner perhaps who could play into her hands. It was in this spirit that she had allowed Mr. Bartlett—possibly encouraged him—to talk after his first reference to his opponent, which was wholly eulogistic.

Her occasional visitor was not always in the mood for gossip. His habitual mien was amiably reticent and somewhat mysterious, as if the cardinal precept in his scheme of life was to keep his mouth shut. He was a compact, well-preserved little man close on sixty, sturdy for his size, with non-committal keen eyes and a shrewd mouth, the expression of which, partly veiled by a stiff iron-gray mustache, provoked the inward comment, "a penny for your thoughts." He volunteered so little concerning himself that, though Mary had been

told that he had more or less to do with politics, one would never have guessed it until one evening under the congenial influences of her fireside he had dropped his mask and become engagingly reminiscent. Some eager remark on Arnold's part looking forward to the day—not far ahead—when he would be a voter, had loosened the visitor's tongue. He was an unreserved admirer of both her children—this was the real bond between them. The result had been that he had talked for two hours on the vicissitudes and escapades of local politics, prompted only by an occasional question from the entranced Arnold. It was not until afterward that she discovered he knew Oliver. Looking back, she could recall the moment when he had acknowledged it, and her thought that it would afford facilities for ambush. The substance of his eulogy had been that Oliver was, "a clean man, had no patience with dirty politics, and was well-liked because he never hit below the belt." The first description uttered with emphasis as if all-embracing was not a palliative. She had left him solely because he was not that—a clean man. All the perfumes in Araby could not cleanse him of one stain. She listened but made no comment, and the children, who had pricked up their ears, contented themselves by exchanging glances out of the speaker's range. Wishing to preserve her incognito in the apartment-house, she had enjoined on them never to give an inkling of their father's identity. They were all known as Arnolds, but she had been obliged to substitute her son's Christian name Martin for his middle name in order to meet the emergency which had arisen.

Strangely enough the only one of her actions at which the children had demurred was the discarding of the use of Randall. Both of them manifested scruples. It seemed to prey upon their minds more than any other factor in the situation, as if they felt she was robbing

them of their birthright. The reminder to Christabel that she would cease to be a Randall when she married could not apply to Arnold, who with the voting lists on his mind harbored obstinate doubts whether it would do after his majority.

Not long after this and while still facing the discovery that she had forestalled the two sources of information by means of which she had planned to bridge her gap of ignorance concerning her husband, she happened to be alone when Arnold (by which name she still addressed her son) entered with a springy step. Large for his age and resembling his father physically, he had her eyes. She noticed that he was elated and a little wistful, as if he would fain bubble over, but refrained on her account.

"Well, dear," she said encouragingly, "what is it?"

She suspected the cause of his suppressed exuberance and a month earlier would have ignored it. But she could not afford for the future to be convicted of obtaining her facts surreptitiously.

The youth drew a newspaper he was hugging from under his arm and, pointing eagerly, exclaimed: "Father is out for the governorship. It's settled that he's to run. He says so in print."

"I'm not surprised. It's natural they should select him, for as lieutenant-governor he's next in order."

"Won't it be fun!" The enthusiasm apparent on his face found vent in a joyous chuckle, as in response to his mother's unwonted receptivity he indicated the page, looking over her shoulder as she read. "Of course I've hoped they would, but now it seems real. There's another allusion farther down, mother. 'Four shy their hats into the ring.' That sounds like a fight. But father loves a fight."

Mary had not the heart to dispute the satisfaction

which he took for granted. His ardor for the moment was contagious while with his cheek so near her own he waited for her comment. "Oh, but it isn't settled," she said, as if disappointed. "There are three other candidates."

"He has worked so much harder for the party than any of the others. Don't you believe he's sure to win?"

"I'm not in a position to judge, my dear," she answered by way of reminding him that there were limits to her indulgence. But she added: "I didn't suppose he would have any opposition. I thought he was the logical candidate."

"I guess there isn't much logic when it comes to running for office," replied the youth with the ready sententiousness of nearly twenty-one. He was a sophomore in Wetmore College in the environs of Benham, whither he had been sent rather than elsewhere by his mother because it was open to both sexes. "I suppose the other three think they've a chance to be governor also. All the same, it may prove a walkover. Father hasn't had any setbacks yet."

He spoke wistfully, as if, despite his confidence, he wished to be reassured. Mary made no immediate comment, being intent on reading for a second time the statement of the reporter at the close of the article, which followed a brief summary of the antecedents and merits of the several aspirants. "Each of the competitors"—so it ran—"has a considerable following. While a fortnight ago it looked as though the lieutenant-governor had plain sailing, at the time of writing the friends of each of the others claim that before the convention meets their man will be deemed to be the most available candidate."

Perusal for a second time failed to alter Mary's first impression that the prophecy was cryptic. Between

the lines of the meticulous impartiality of the scribe, she traced the menace of the inspired writer. A fortnight ago the nomination appeared to be Oliver's for the asking—she did not need the words of the reporter to remind her of that. She had been aware at the back of her mind for months that he was likely to be governor. Now he faced the certainty of a contest and the intimation that the outcome was doubtful. To her ear the phrase, "the most available candidate," was too explicit to be wholly perfunctory. While Oliver's success had remained more or less of a mystery to her, there could be no question that he measured in the public sense head and shoulders above any of his rivals. Two of them were respectable but colorless party hacks; the third a more inspiring figure, but to single him out would be to pass over Oliver. Something was evidently in the wind. The man who wrote that snapper believed the triumvirate had resources up their sleeve which would land one of them in office.

And as she mused Arnold seemed to divine her thoughts, for he asserted: "There's nothing they could bring up against father."

Mary paused an instant, then she said: "I'm unable to tell you."

The words were dry. She had not meant them to seem more than a disclaimer of accurate knowledge. Yet she realized from the boy's crestfallen air that they were disconcerting.

He flushed, dumfounded. "I'm certain there isn't," he asserted stoutly; but he was manifestly troubled and a moment later blurted out: "Surely, mother, they wouldn't be mean enough to drag in—his private life."

The appeal was directly to her, as if on this point she could certainly enlighten him, having in a sense put it

into his head. "I can't say, Arnold. I'm as ignorant as you are."

"But would you let them?" he asked impetuously.

"What have I to do with it, my son?"

He stared hesitatingly like one rebuffed yet still unsatisfied. "Nothing, except——"

His frowning concern became him, imparting to his soft Newfoundland-doglike adolescence the rigidity of purpose. He was more definitive in attitude, less easy-going than his father. While she did not begrudge the hero-worship, it was an arrow in Mary's bosom that the son who was her joy and pride should disclose upon the threshold of life the same old moral astigmatism. Far from seeking to help him out, her first obligation clearly was to readjust his perspective, even though the idol dwindled in the process.

"As I have just told you, what we see in the newspaper is Greek to me; but since you put it that way, Arnold, I don't know why a man's private life hasn't a very definite bearing on whether he is the most available person to be governor of the State."

The boy sighed and dropped his eyes as if convicted of disloyalty to his ideals. "That must be so, mother, of course," he said sadly. Yet an instant later he lifted them again to add: "But father's such a splendid man in other respects that perhaps——"

He faltered ere he finished, perceiving from his mother's look that he was in danger of paltering with principle again.

"I mean I don't believe that's what the article refers to, even if it would be a square deal."

"Most likely not. I hope you're right." Yet the phrase, "in other respects," seemed to Mary such a sorry slip that she could not refrain from forcing the lesson home by saying: "But that doesn't obliterate the fact."

"The fact?" Echoing her charge, Arnold recoiled with dismay, then turned contrite. "Of course it doesn't, mother. I'm not excusing father. He treated you badly, and you've suffered dreadfully in consequence." He put his arms about her tenderly and kissed her. "Only——"

"Dear boy, I understand. I'm not blaming you for wishing your father should get the nomination. It's only natural and—fitting that you should be proud of his political success."

Arnold threw his head back and, with his hands upon his mother's shoulders, looked her in the eyes. His own were lustrous with a timid yet resolute intent. "What *was* the fact, mother? You've hinted at it, but never explained. Something about a woman—you told us that when we were kids too young to comprehend, except that you were shocked and sad and could not live with father any more. It was sufficient then for us that you said so, much as we loved father. It has been a closed door ever since even between Chris and me. We've never talked it over. We took for granted, I suppose, that you were right and have kept off the subject. But now I'm grown up. What was it father did? Who was the woman? Any one we know?"

It was not the moment to bandy words or be evasive. Since he asked it was proper that he should know. "I was rather surprised you didn't guess at the time, Arnold. I feel sure that Christabel suspects, though she has never told me so. It was some one you knew very well and saw constantly."

He knit his brows and nodded. "Then it was she—Aunt Sybil."

"You called her so. She was of course no relation, but my nearest friend; later the deliberate cause of all our terrible unhappiness. Yes, it's right that you

should be informed of everything, now that you're a man."

"But she's married, mother, and Mrs. Henry Thornton. If I ever did put two and two together, that explained it all—she left us to get married. I might have guessed too, for we were very fond of her and she ceased to come to the house. But somehow I took for granted it wasn't she."

"No wonder, Arnold."

"Was it as bad as that?" He paused an instant. "You mean that father and she did something unforgivable?"

"Yes, Arnold."

He seemed to droop before her monosyllable. "Well, that alters it. I've always felt before I didn't know." Throwing himself upon the lounge, he stared moodily at the gas-log fire, against the sterile glitter of which he had now and again protested, only to be informed that it avoided dust and labor. He mused a moment: "And it doesn't seem like father either. I've sided with you, of course—yet I've looked up to him all these years in spite of everything. It may sound strange, but he was my ideal."

"And mine, my son, in every way until— You inquired just now as to the fact—if anything unforgivable occurred. It was unforgivable for a wife who loved him with all her heart and trusted him completely." Mary paused to choose her words. She would not mince the truth, yet must be ingenuous with the child compelled to judge between them. "They intended everything—the worst. My own eyes were the witness."

He looked a little nonplussed. "You mean you caught them together?"

The rawness of the term jarred on her, yet she faced it. "Yes, I caught her in his arms and saw him—heard

him making love to her. Now you know all that I know, Arnold. To me it was inexplicable, and I have been very miserable in consequence." Involuntarily she buried her face in her hands. The confession sounded strangely in her own ears, yet she had said it.

Arnold sprang to his feet to comfort her. "You must have, mother. I'm terribly sorry for you."

Mary took his hands and looked into his face. "You mustn't misunderstand me, dear. I've managed to get on. It broke my heart, but there it ended. I've grieved so for you children—yet I've had you with me, thank God. I've been dependent wholly on my own resources; this was some comfort, and recognition has come to me. It hasn't been so bad—only you can't expect me to feel about your father's nomination exactly as you do." She realized that through her tears she was trying to smile in a sinuous attempt to contradict herself and was succeeding.

Arnold followed the false scent. "It was stupid of me to let myself go like that. No wonder you don't feel much interest."

"I do feel interested. I hope very much he'll win. But—my opinion on the likelihood of his winning is much less valuable than yours, dear."

The boy accepted this at its face value. "I try to keep track of everything that is printed about him, and the other day at the theatre he confided in me a little—hinted without saying in so many words where he hoped the lightning would strike." Arnold walked up and down the sitting-room a few times with his hands in his pockets, then halted to volunteer: "It's a big position, the governorship."

"An important and honorable one."

He reflected briefly. "And you would be the governor's wife—" Pausing, he emphasized a moment later

the ellipsis by adding: "You would be anyway, wouldn't you?"

It seemed to Mary that they were drifting to dangerous ground, from which it was prudent to retire. His catechizing was too much like being cross-examined in court. "We had better not discuss that feature of the matter any further," she said with decision.

The boy colored and resumed his seat upon the sofa, evidently reminded that his reversion to politics had been a little abrupt in view of the depth of the tragedy just revealed to him. "I'm sorry, mother; I was only thinking." He nursed his knee meditatively, seeking to make amends. "So it was Aunt Sybil after all! Somehow I took for granted that it wasn't she. You see she married right away and lives in that swell house on Dorset Avenue." He stopped and pondered a second, then essayed: "I wonder if she and father continue to meet."

"I've no idea," Mary replied, but felt constrained to correct herself in the same breath. "I have no reason to think so."

Arnold adopted the cue with alacrity. "I don't believe they do. She has a husband who's tremendously rich and gives her everything, and she had a baby. The baby died. I wondered at the time you didn't seem to feel more sorry, and that we didn't hear of it till some time after. Besides, father's pretty lonely. I've wondered often what was the matter with him and now I see—he's lonely. It's curious how one can go on simply accepting what appears without really understanding. But now—" His bright wistfulness quailed again before the mute pathos of his mother's face. "Understanding on both sides, I mean. I see it all now, and it's terrible. And much the worse for you, mother. Father was the one to blame, of course—he and Aunt Sybil."

Mary bowed her head for answer. "It's very sad that you should be obliged to judge between us," she murmured.

"Oh, yes, it was all his fault, we never doubted that," he continued with the readiness of one repeating a formula. He stood with a despondent brow staring at the filled-in picture. Suddenly a light as of solution overspread his face and he stayed the hand with which he was stroking his mother's hair in order to exclaim: "See here, mother, why don't you make up? You've had a miserable time, and of course you couldn't go on living with father at first. But it's six years since then, and he has made awfully good before the public, and he's our father. Couldn't you be—magnanimous, if that's the word, and surprise him by letting him know you're ready to take him back? He'd rush to your side in a minute and fall at your feet, I'm positive." Gathering courage as he proceeded, he looked at her with face aglow, transported by the glamour of his appeal. "That would unite us all, and—and settle everything, mother. They couldn't say a word against him then. He'd be elected governor, and—and you would be the governor's wife."

Mary winced before this frontal attack. "What you ask is impossible, Arnold."

"Oh, mother!" He considered an instant before he added earnestly: "I wonder if you realize that father is becoming one of the distinguished men—of the country. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he were President of the United States some day."

The same old fulsome prophecy. It might have been Sybil or Ham, or good old Everett Dean speaking. "Very possibly, my dear. That couldn't affect the matter one way or the other." Mary was not sure which was the harder to bear, his naïve enthusiasm or moral obtuseness. "You ought to know that it's impossible,

my son. You whom I've taught from the cradle to regard masculine purity as—an essential. Suppose I had been the offender, would your father take me back? Would you be urging him to take me back?

"I hope so—if I could conceive of such a thing."

"And yet what would seem so monstrous in my case, you manage to gloss over in your father's. To use your own words—in spite of everything, he was your ideal. Is that worthy of my teaching or your best self?"

Arnold showed the confusion of one who has spoken too quickly. "You know I'm dead against the double standard, mother. I'm not trying to discriminate."

"Not intentionally, I'm well aware. But just the same you are discriminating. When you think it over by and by, you'll realize so."

He looked abashed and meditated for a moment, then he answered: "As to what happened, I only know what you told me. But according to what you said they—my father—didn't——"

Mary cut him short. "You needn't elaborate, Arnold. You're quite correct. There was no occurrence in the sense you mean so far as I know. But—but if there had been, you'd be extenuating just the same, my son. You wound me the most, but you're not the first to make the suggestion."

Mary breathed deeply. With all his well-meaning innocence, it was plain that he had saved up this distinction to the last as a trump card. While he hung his head bewildered, she hastened to add: "I know you're trying to be a comfort to me, and I don't begrudge your loyalty to your father; it's splendid. But I shouldn't have been doing my duty as your mother had I not reminded you that you were letting your interest in his nomination and your desire to see everything smoothed out amicably blind you to the clear-cut chasm be-

tween right and wrong which separates your father and me."

She choked a little in her intensity, and at that moment the door opened and Christabel appeared on the threshold, returning from outdoors. Just eighteen, she too was destined for Wetmore College, but, being a little backward in her studies, was not to enter until next year. Indeed, there were moments when Mary feared that she might never go at all. A lovely dimpled maiden, tall and stylish, her dark eyes that seemed wells of mystery were eminently compatible with a progressive spirit. Nevertheless she had become almost a thorn in her mother's side by reason of her tastes, which up to this time were certainly not intellectual. She cared openly for pretty clothes and had given signs of being susceptible to the minor attentions of the opposite sex—dismally atavistic propensities, considering the pains expended on her. If only she were more like Virginia Vose, and girls of that stamp! Mary sighed constantly to think that she was not, and her very latest costume with its rakish turban, fur stole, overskirts, and spats—fetchingly as she wore it this afternoon—was in a sense a trial to her mother. She did not begrudge the money—there was plenty, and she acknowledged Christabel's good taste, but oh! the paltriness of such a manifestation when measured by her hopes.

Despite the reproach of his mother's words, the effect of his sister's entrance was to give a fresh fillip to Arnold's rejected purpose. As she stood looking from one to the other with the swift curiosity of one divining that she has broken in upon no ordinary discussion, he exclaimed eagerly: "You've come just in time, Chris, to jump in and help me out. I've been trying to persuade mother to send for father and make up. He's running for governor and there's an article in the *Sentinel* that hints

darkly they may drag in his private life if she doesn't. She has been thinking it over, but says she can't. Try and make her. She has just told me who the woman was who separated her and father. It was Aunt Sybil."

"Of course it was," said Christabel as she removed her gloves. "Have you only just discovered that? I knew ages ago."

"You caught on, did you? I suppose I was stupid. It would have broken me all up if I'd known at the time, and it's fierce anyway. But six years have passed since it happened, and hateful as it was, it wasn't as bad as it might have been. That's not any excuse," he emphasized the word—"but mother'll confirm what I said, and Aunt Sybil's married and settled. If she forgives him, we'll all be together again, and as the governor's wife she'll have the other club-women beaten a mile. If father loses the nomination, I shall always feel it was because his family went back on him. I've told her so and it's up to you, Chris, to persuade her."

"I haven't heard what passed before I came in," the girl answered. "Of course I'm crazy to see father governor, but as to the other women, mother has them beaten a mile already, haven't you, mother?"

Mary smiled wanly at this timely tribute. Her son's assumption that her own importance would be greatly enhanced by the gubernatorial lustre had been trying. Disappointing as her daughter was as an intellectual companion, she could invariably count on her for loyalty and a certain instinctive sweetness. But before she could qualify the eulogy, Arnold, again penitent, had risen to the occasion.

"I seem to keep putting my foot in it. Don't I know mother's a queen bee, and that there's no one in the class with her? What I meant was she'd set off father.

People would miss her and want to know where his wife was." As his sister made a grimace in token of this tardy adjustment, he added: "All the same you'd be mighty glad of an excuse for buying some new toggery."

Christabel took the impeachment placidly. "I wouldn't mind at all being the governor's daughter. It would be fun." Then as she mused her face clouded. "And living as we do—seeing father only occasionally, and feeling all the time that I am bound to side with you, mother, it simply means that he pets me and I don't really get to know him." She paused an instant and shook her head. "I don't pretend to be a judge, for I don't really know what happened, and mother is the only one who does."

"But I've just explained,"—interposed Arnold.

Christabel covered her ears with her hands. "I don't care to hear. The details don't make any difference; I agree with mother in that."

"But she'd be far happier if she went back," he asserted stoutly after an instant.

His sister in the act of removing her stylishly tilted turban paused to answer: "Mother's the only one who can decide that."

"I've told Arnold it's impossible, dear."

Without her hat Christabel's effect was still further differentiated from her mother's by the profusion of her hair, which hung low and clustering, like bunches of grapes. Mary had always thought of her own type of beauty as that of a graceful antelope, but such a comparison did not suit her daughter in the least; her lines were soft and luscious even at this early stage. Once when attired in fancy dress she might have passed for a languid Oriental, the flower (save for the sinister association) of some voluptuary's harem. Christabel was lovely, and even at this moment Mary was pleasurably

susceptible to the knowledge, but what an anomaly that she should be her daughter!

Led on by the comprehension of her attitude which the girl's words indicated, Mary added: "I think I'm a fairly happy person, all things considered—with two such treasures."

Christabel, who despite her definiteness had spoken before like one in revery, raised her eyes and turned them full on her parent as if in surprise. "Oh, no, you're not, mother. I don't consider you happy at all. On the contrary——"

The mounting distress in Mary's face caused the critic to hesitate, which gave an opportunity for Arnold to assert: "There. You hear what she says, mother."

"I don't know what you mean, Christabel."

"You conceal the fact. You try not to let us—or any one, know. 'But it's there just the same. You've never gotten over what happened.'" Despite her sweetness and lack of initiative, there was at times, as Mary already knew, an unflinchingly direct quality in the girl which might have been inherited from either side.

"I told Arnold before you came in that it broke my heart, but that it ended there."

"Ended?"

"I've lived my sorrow down and been reasonably happy, I suppose; my love for your father ceased at the moment when he made it necessary for me to leave him and take you children with me." Mary sought to be explicit and seem very calm, so as to lay the ghost of this miscomprehension forever.

"Then that settles it," said Christabel. "If you don't care for father, you can't go back to him merely to please us children." The response was so unequivocal that it sounded like the obvious answer to an easy question in arithmetic. But Mary's satisfaction was spoiled

by the naïve tag which followed: "I've sometimes wondered if you didn't care."

Quivering at the artlessness, Mary turned it off with authority: "I seem to have given you a very queer impression, child, as to my state of mind."

"If it had been so, mother, we might all be really happy again."

Though the reply suggested no pride of belief, Mary did not feel sure that she had convinced her daughter. "It was natural at your age that you should hope so. I can't blame you any more than I do Arnold for not quite comprehending that your father and I can never be one again in spirit. That door was closed the day I left him. You will understand why when you are older if you don't to-day."

"But I do already, if you say it's so. Then I was wrong, of course. Yet I did hope." Whereupon Christabel, stepping forward, impulsively threw her arms around Mary's neck. "Whatever you do is right for me, you dear splendid mother."

Mary pressed her to her bosom. "I live to please you children. What should I do without you?" She turned toward her son. "You see it troubles Arnold that I should seem to be standing in your father's light—obscuring his political prospects. He would like me to go back, I think, merely to save appearances." This, she felt, was the residuum of his solicitude when analyzed, and now that they were all three together she did not wish to ignore any point of view.

Christabel abetted her promptly. "Of course you can't. How can she, Arnold?" And then she added: "If mother doesn't love father, I don't believe he'd want her back. What good would it do?"

It was so well put that Mary felt proud of her champion. She realized that she would have been at a

loss herself to solve the situation so satisfactorily and simply.

"It might elect him governor," replied Arnold staunchly.

Christabel looked at her brother a moment. "That has nothing whatever to do with it. I should think any one would see that." As she spoke she gathered up her belongings with an air of finality, as if further discussion was superfluous. Yet she added: "You seem to forget that mother has had an awfully hard time."

"We don't disagree on that. She knows I'm just as loyal to her as you are, Chris." The condescension imparted to the mild reproof, arguing the unconscious superiority of the feminine mind, nettled the slightly older brother, accustomed though he was to the rough and ready freemasonry of their mutual devotion. "But what has that to do with it either?" he asked doggedly.

"I was endeavoring to show you when you butted in," responded Christabel, repossessed of all her hatpins. "I hoped it would help you to see."

The charge against Arnold of being a little dense was not altogether novel in the relations of these two, ardently attached as they were. Their occasional disagreements were apt to spring from a quicker mind on the one side and a magnified sense of fraternal responsibility on the other—either of which never failed to be exasperating. So it proved in the present instance, for the male in question retorted: "Oh, did you? I manage to see some things perhaps which I'm not intended to see."

If the mother noticed the unmistakably significant remark, she was too intent on reconciling the disputants to lend more than a casual ear to it.

"Children, children, the only conflict between you is that some things are bound to strike women differently

than men. Chris sees because she's a woman." Mary spoke from the fulness of the lips, yet the next moment she realized that she had thereby subscribed to a discrimination, against the fatalism of which she had always protested.

But her son's interest in the essential topic had already been overshadowed by the antagonism of personal pique. "That's all right. I admit it. Women's wits work faster than men's. They're cleverer all round and see lots of things we never discover. I ought to know that by this time, considering how often it's rubbed into me." He looked directly at his sister as he spoke, and his words were obviously addressed wholly to her. "At the same time——"

"Why, Arnold, what's the matter?" ejaculated Mary in her surprise. Edifying as the statement might have seemed with different modulation, the irony was unmistakable.

Though Christabel realized that the pause following the words, "at the same time," were in the nature of a dare, as much as to say that she had better be careful, she had already been goaded by his innuendo to a point where she chose to throw discretion to the winds.

"I'm glad you admit it at last. It took you six years to find out about Aunt Sybil and then you had to be told, and we've just spent a lot of valuable time trying to make you see that the governorship can't possibly affect mother's actions one way or the other."

Though the words were thongs, she spoke suavely as if butter would not melt in her mouth, but moved toward her bedroom door from an instinct of self-preservation. If she escaped before he told, she could count on him to hold his tongue.

But Arnold anticipated her. "Hold on," he cried. "Before you go mother would like to hear how you've

been spending some of your valuable time. I'm 'on' to some things quick enough. Who was the amorous kid I met you sauntering with yesterday at dusk?"

So he had been mean enough! Simply because he was furious. Christabel turned scarlet and tossed her head. "No matter who he was. That's my affair. You've been spying, eh?"

"Spying? No, I nearly ran plumb into you. It was so advertised that the town could see," chortled the tormentor, raising his voice so that she should be sure to hear before she slammed the door.

Mother and son looked at each other. The disclosure had swept Mary's brain clear in a trice of every other consideration. A lover whom she did not know? Her matrimonial hopes for Christabel involved such a test of essentials that haphazard acquaintance alarmed her. She wished her daughter to love tremendously, yet with eyes wide open.

"Who was he, dear?" she inquired with solicitude.

Arnold was already experiencing qualms. He had never really meant to tell tales, being habitually loyal as steel to his sister, and the recipient of many confidences, of which this, however, was not one. Having been goaded into letting the cat out of the bag, his impulse now was to whisk the animal away as quickly as possible. Unfortunately this was difficult, especially in view of the immediate question.

"I don't know. I never saw him before," he answered—and this was the truth. Then, realizing that he had done all the mischief in his power, he strove to bolster up his self-respect by exclaiming stoutly: "If I knew, it wouldn't be square to Chris to tell."

Mary dodged this point in fraternal ethics. "But we must find out at once," she said. "After all, Arnold, a brother is a natural protector."

Uttered aloud, the phrase had an oddly conventional sound. Mary realized that for a second time within half an hour the complications of life had induced her to draw a sight-draft on a bank from which she supposed she had withdrawn her deposit, and her horizon, which she had hoped to clarify by looking existence in the face, had become almost murky. She felt limp and harassed. Nor did her son's somewhat Delphic response serve to relieve her sensibilities.

"That's all right, mother. I don't suppose Chris would marry him without letting you know."

Mary recognized the remark as exaggerated—partly jocular, and that by beating a retreat to his own room Arnold was endeavoring to avoid the risk of further treachery. But somehow the speech, which was doubtless meant to be comforting, struck terror to her soul. Was it not cruel that just at the moment when she had drawn nearer to her daughter this grotesque possibility should be flashed upon her? Grotesque, for Christabel was barely eighteen, still virtually a child with all her future before her; a future the promise of which would be inevitably blighted were she to lose her heart before she found her head.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE gubernatorial nomination went to Oliver without much ado. When the delegates assembled the strength of his rivals proved to have been overestimated, and the vote by which he was chosen was finally made unanimous. Nevertheless several additional straws in the form of newspaper items, appearing from time to time not merely before but after the event, served to keep alive the suspicion in Mary's mind that there was something working against him below the surface. Though openly proclaimed the strongest candidate who could have been picked out, there were sly hints in the press of both parties that it would be up-hill work to elect him.

Mary realized that she was on the watch for these and she kept them to herself, not choosing to mar the satisfaction of Arnold who was already prognosticating victory. She could not help feeling curious as to the nature of the rumor which nobody seemed disposed to mention, but which was being furtively circulated. One man, to be sure, would presumably be able to enlighten her, if she chose to lead up to the subject—Mr. Bartlett, who regarding her as an unsophisticated artist, at whose fireside he was fond of dropping in at decent intervals, could be relied on not to put two and two together.

Mary decided to investigate at the first opportunity. She realized that her dialogue with her children had left her disturbed. Their attachment for their father in the

face of everything which had happened was not exactly disheartening—for she could not have wished them not to feel it. But even Christabel had displayed a certain obtuseness in spite of her grasp of essentials, for she had made plain that she longed to see her parents reunited, thus glossing over the unsavory past as if it had been blotted out by the passage of time. What a different attitude Virginia Vose would have assumed toward a similar paternal lapse! Mary felt that her son's demeanor had been sophomoric both in its enthusiasm and its blundering. She was sure of his devotion and that she could rely absolutely on his allegiance if it came to a test; nevertheless his mental processes and equivocations had been distressingly familiar, culminating in the artless reminder that the infidelity had been interrupted, which had given her the opportunity to confound him. It was paralyzing that the flesh of her flesh—the one man in all the world for whose immaculateness she was responsible—should on the very threshold of life follow in the tracks of his predecessors and even make a virtue of doing so. He had explained away and minimized guilt like all the rest of his sex she had ever known, beginning with Walter Price and George Patterson and good old Everett Dean and not excepting Ham, whose extenuating confession had left desolating memories. And the bitterest feature of her perplexity was the boy's ignorance of his own imitativeness. For all her plain speaking, his face up to the day when the convention met betokened only this—that if his father were defeated, she might be the one responsible. As to all else he was apparently conscience free.

Then there was Christabel's affair to cope with; not that it merited more than a watchful eye. Direct inquiry elicited the youth's name, and the medium of introduction—a miscellaneous *thé dansant*. That her daugh-

ter should delight in swiftly graceful motion brought back Mary's own youth. But should not the joy of living beget a fine frenzy in the soul? Whereas a few shrewd questions disclosed the acquaintance to have developed almost overnight into intimacy which seemed based on nothing more descriptive than liking to be together—for Christabel proved very vague as to her swain's antecedents and employment, being able to state merely that he was a crack shot in the militia and employed by a railroad. In what capacity was not clear. "I will ask him, mother, and tell you," she had replied sweetly enough, but with an air which showed only too plainly that she thought the knowledge unimportant. The mutual attraction when analyzed appeared to be that they liked the same things and that he did not bore her. The last consideration was dwelt on by Christabel, as if it rendered further wonder as to why they had sauntered together after dusk superfluous. But no clew was afforded as to ideals or ideas. Their atmosphere seemed to Mary strangely different from that of her own maidenhood, when it had been instinctive to hold off every man until she felt he was worthy of her. But it presently appeared that these children had called each other by their first names after their first meeting.

To make light of the flirtation was obviously the only thing to do, for it was bound to blow over. "You must bring Mr. Rivers to the house. I like to know all your friends," Mary volunteered forthwith, a proposal which Christabel assented to with alacrity. But when interrogated as to why she had not done so earlier, the culprit proved vague again, ending up with: "I knew he was giving me a 'rush,' and I thought you might not like it."

"A rush?" The vernacular left Mary mystified for an instant, then she understood. At least the child was

frank in spite of having accepted attentions designedly inordinate. "I hope you've not been undignified."

Christabel laughed and answered: "He is given that way, some of the girls warned me. He knows that I know; now he has slowed down and—we're very good friends. Do you mind my having him to dinner?"

Mary hastened to declare that this was exactly what she desired. Mr. Rivers when he arrived was disarming to the outer eye from the point of view of her immediate prejudice, for "rush" when pondered was a repugnant figure of speech plainly suggestive of the antics of male proprietorship. He betrayed no sign of smirking or complacent gallantry. On the contrary he was rather diffident, and in conversation at the dinner-table with herself becomingly responsive when directly addressed, yet for adult social purposes tongue-tied. He had a sturdy physique, pleasant countenance, and civil address; indeed there was nothing in the relation of the two young things to which she could take exception, save that she knew nothing about him. He struck her as the average well-set-up, bright if nondescript young American. But what of his principles, his ambitions, his attitude toward the cardinal precepts of modern sociology?

When after dinner the pair withdrew to the comparative seclusion afforded by connecting rooms, the snatches of the conversation which reached her bubbled over with an easy comradeship which baffled homilies. How had they come to know each other so well in so short a time, and what was she to think of it? Nothing of course, except that they seemed to be enjoying themselves at the moment. Nevertheless when the desire for a book in the room where they were gave her an excuse to satisfy her curiosity by disturbing them, the sight which met her eye made her shudder. The pair were sitting

side by side proper and cosey as turtle-doves. Mr. Rivers was describing something—Mary gathered that it concerned a sharpshooting contest—and Christabel was looking up into his face with an expression which to the sensitive maternal eye seemed to say: “You are so wonderful that I could grovel at your feet.”

And this after less than a fortnight’s acquaintance. It was preposterous. They might have been mating birds or squirrels instead of two responsible human beings for whom matrimony was a sacred, serious trust. As she resumed her seat, she winced under the memory of her daughter’s unconscious but unmistakable back-sliding. To think that a girl scrupulously taught to guard the sanctuary of her soul until she could throw herself with a glad bound into the arms of a tried and proved Sir Galahad, should make herself so cheap! Yes, it was appallingly like the animals, and must be counteracted before it went any further.

Yet as Mary sat with her book in her lap trying to account for this premature hero-worship and blushing for her daughter, the words Christabel had recently addressed to her: “I’ve sometimes wondered if you didn’t care,” suddenly came back to her. The same thing had happened more than once since the interview with her children. The charge—for it was virtually this—had a way of cropping up at odd moments, without connection, as if to take her off her guard. Seeking now some clew for its recurrence, she seemed to find kinship between her memory of the tone in which the words had been uttered in the first instance and the look just surprised on Christabel’s face. Somehow the presence of this susceptible young couple had so put in relief the absence of the masculine element in her own existence that she was staring at the lack with a sense of hunger. Involuntarily her daughter’s rapt expression had re-

mined her—a reality which she had never been tempted to formulate for six years—that save for her immature son she had no one to make love to and embrace her. She recognized that she was again the victim of one of those mortifying accessions of feeling by which she had been tormented in the past, and though she reprobated her daughter's behavior, she realized nevertheless that she was almost envying her. Six years—during which no man of her own generation had entered into her life. So viewed they seemed an eternity. Was her horizon complete without that something of which she was utterly deprived?

There was no one else. The exact knowledge caused Mary to straighten in her chair, pointedly considering if there might not be. She glanced at the mirror in appraisal of herself without partiality as a comely, inviting, stylish woman of whom a lover should be proud. She wondered for a moment that there was not; it seemed almost a reproach. The fact stood out—it struck her as extraordinary now—that she had never looked at any man twice since she and Oliver had separated. There had never been any question of a divorce—it had not even been mooted—but somehow in the crucible of her immediate mood all scruples and impediments seemed to melt away at contact with the possibility of her having wished another's arms around her. Cold she had never been. Those who imagined her so were self-deceived. The capacity to love exaltedly, and the rapture of being loved—she had aspired to drain the two-handled cup to the last drops. Was she not quaffing it in full measure up to the moment when it fell crashing to the ground and broke in fragments?

The sound of footsteps broke in upon her revery. The visitor was advancing to take his leave, and had surprised her in the act of dreaming of love. A pitiful

performance—to be apologized for to herself and thrust out of sight as quickly as possible. Rallying her wits, Mary glanced at the clock. It was still decently early. Her own need of a cloak made her almost cordial while bidding Mr. Rivers good night. He must come again, an invitation quite foreign to her purpose. Out of the corner of her eye she beheld Christabel beam contentedly as she spoke. Yet she had not the heart to scold the child after they were alone; lest indeed the culprit retaliate. Were they not for the nonce tarred with the same brush? To say anything aloud, whether by way of admonition or palliative, seemed at the moment disingenuous and somehow profanation. Instead, Mary had recourse to the condition of her own nerves—which had doubtless led her to exaggerate on either score. She felt the desire to escape from such complicity, yet at the same time lamentably tender. Shrinking from the inquiry: “What did you think of him, mother?” which she divined to be hanging on Christabel’s lips, she kissed her nevertheless with the exaltation of one who, touched by mystery, fears to mar the occasion by speech, and bade her good night.

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Before Mary had an opportunity to invite confidences from Mr. Bartlett the gubernatorial campaign was fully under way. Even for those who do not live in Benham a few words of explanation will epitomize the course of events since the first inauguration of Governor Guy Bonner. That inspiring leader withdrew at the close of his second term in order to become a senator of the United States, and was succeeded by Aaron Felton, who after a single year in office fell a victim to the defection wide-spread through the country due to the third political party, which claimed to be the torch-bearer and champion

of the humanitarian impulse vibrating from the Atlantic to the Pacific. He yielded the governor's chair to one of the old-time adversaries, and save for a few crumbs of comfort in the form of seats in the legislature, none of the loaves and fishes of victory were secured by those responsible for the turnover. Nor was the result so one-sided that the late incumbent felt obliged to retire the subsequent fall in favor of a new standard-bearer. Again the triple contest with all its acerbities held the stage, but a sop to Cerberus, as it were, was provided by the nomination of Oliver Randall as the candidate for lieutenant-governor. It was whispered that, though a staunch partisan, he did not hesitate to declare in private the malcontents to be half right and certain points of view for which his own party stood to be antiquated and impediments to social justice. So insistent was he in his efforts to reform from within by urging the support of this or that measure that during his first year as lieutenant-governor, which provided him with an opportunity to bide his time by holding his tongue, he incurred the disapproval of the ultraconservative wing of his camp, who began to look askance at him as dangerous.

Thus began, indeed, the flank movement by which Oliver Randall managed to put in the wrong his opponents, who only yesterday were flushed with success, and to reunite all the elements of his own party without yielding an inch of self-respect. That he was able to do so and do it honestly is what stands out with human appeal and will seem to those who know him well (as you do) consistent with the courage and love of fair play previously shown by him on the stump. The lucid presentation of issues made by him at the convention which nominated him as lieutenant-governor for a third term—combining a frank confession of previous shortcomings,

bold welcome of the good accomplished by the adversaries, and an apostrophe to the voters to cry halt ere the purging tide of progress become a torrent of destruction—revealed him as the Moses who could lead the party out of the wilderness of evil days.

When the time came to pick a candidate for the following year there were many who urged the choice of Oliver. The influence of the old guard, still harboring resentment at his independence, which they labelled concessions to demagogy, was thrown against him and Governor Felton was given another chance to recover his lost laurels. But though he was the standard-bearer, the impetus which restored him to office was Oliver's vivifying speech at the convention; and on his inauguration for this the third time it was a tradition of the party that the governor-elect would not again become a candidate. That his successor would be Oliver had seemed a foregone conclusion until within a few weeks of the date when the choice would be actually made. Those who sought the origin of the twelfth-hour suggestions of doubt were unable to ascribe them to the ultra-conservative wing, for the best of testimony that Oliver had been forgiven and was now in high favor was supplied by the substantial support which Henry Ives Thornton, until lately a mere subaltern in the councils of the party, was known to be giving Oliver Randall's candidacy. In the language of the street, he had taken off his coat and was working for him tooth and nail.

An ugly story uncontradicted and working beneath the surface spreads with the rapidity of one of the low organisms which it resembles. The triple contest was on again, and uneven as the odds had been heralded to be at the start, it was said to be anybody's battle. The divined knowledge of this was already preying on Mary's mind before she found herself alone with her neighbor

from across the entry. Some sinister influence had obviously checked the tide of enthusiasm in the favorite's behalf. Could it possibly concern their domestic relations? The wonder made her almost forward in seizing the opportunity presented by an evening call from Mr. Bartlett when neither of her children happened to be at home.

"Won't you enlighten me concerning the State election? I gather from the newspapers that the contest is close, and you know everything about politics."

Mary hoped that her words sounded like the ingenuous request of an ignoramus thirsting for knowledge.

Shooting at her an inquisitive glance by way of astonishment at the broaching of a subject so remote from their usual topics, he replied: "What do you wish to know?"

"Who is likely to be chosen governor?"

"We can't be sure of that until the votes are counted."

"Then it *is* close?"

"Much more so than appeared at first."

"Then I was right."

He caught up her comment which had the effect of a soliloquy. "You take some interest, I see; and that implies a preference."

The process of making headway against his habitual reticence was too painfully suggestive of boring through a solid door with a gimlet to suit her mood. Unless she led him on she would get nowhere.

"I hope Lieutenant-Governor Randall will win. My son, you know, is one of his most ardent admirers."

"To be sure. I remember now."

The introduction being accounted for, Mary felt more at her ease.

"Hasn't he done pretty well?" she asked.

An indulgent smile stole from under the ambush of

the visitor's iron-gray mustache. "As one of his earliest and most orthodox political enemies, I'll admit to you in secret that he has. What's more he's their best man and strongest candidate. You've heard me hint as much before." He mused an instant, then with an instinctive glance around to make sure they were alone, added: "I wouldn't lie awake nights if Oliver Randall were elected governor. If we'd been on the same side, we might have been pals; being in opposite camps, we've fought each other hard from the first—ever since I was the ward leader and he started in to get my scalp. That's what they used to quote him in the old days as going round saying—he'd get Steve Bartlett's scalp."

Mary started at the phrase, which came back to her across the lapse of years with haunting familiarity. How often she had heard Oliver use it! It was the shibboleth of his political apprenticeship, which going in at one ear and out at the other, had nevertheless become fixed in her memory by iteration. And at once she realized how dense she had been. The almost elderly and lonely Mr. Bartlett of the apartment-house was no other than the redoubtable Steve of yore, the villain of innumerable plots and counterplots. Why had she not divined sooner what was now so very patent?

Mary let her eyes rest on him with fresh interest, comparing respectable reality with the mental vision of a monster too repugnant for decent feminine attention. She feared lest her confusion would arrest the scrutiny of those vigilant eyes. Fortunately a reminiscent mood had thrown him off his guard. Her returning faculties caught the fag-end of the anecdote he was telling to justify his partiality for a political opponent—"a square trotter from the start and he hasn't deviated. But he never rubbed it in, and that's why we bore no malice."

The same old praise revamped; and yet her conscious-

ness of her incognito made it more palatable than hitherto. Before she had discovered who he was, she had listened to it without emotion; yet now that the testimony came from the disreputable Steve Bartlett and ought to be discounted, she felt a thrill of pride. It was like being admitted to stage secrets. And knowing so much he would necessarily know everything. For this seemingly placid individual, who had the air of living in an eddy, who discussed water-colors with her and made much of her children, was a power behind the throne—one of the uncrowned kings who shaped the destinies of parties. His name once local was well-known beyond the borders of the State—yet she had never associated the formal Stephen with the colloquial “Steve.” But the advantage was hers despite her stupidity. She had found out who he was, but he was still completely in the dark as to her identity. And she would avail herself before it was too late of this chance to find out, without leaving him any the wiser why she wished to know.

“Why has he been losing ground, Mr. Bartlett?”

Recalled to the immediate present by the practical question, the politician shrank into silence which for a moment seemed suspicious. Plainly he was asking himself if this was the lady architect whose sole concerns were feminine and whose domestic hearth he sought as a refuge from kindred discussion.

“You seem to have followed the campaign very closely.”

“It’s on my son’s account. He insists on posting me. And so—though I’m no politician—I’ve gradually become interested.”

She could see that the explanation disarmed him and that he was wondering if he could not safely make a confidant of one both discreet and so remotely concerned.

"I don't see why I shouldn't tell you if you wish to know." Nevertheless he paused and looked to right and left again.

"It's just a woman's curiosity."

As the words escaped her Mary realized that for the first time in her life she was deliberately practising wiles upon a man that he might do her bidding. It was an odd sensation. Until now she had waited for all men to come to her.

"It's his private life."

Then she had been right. Mary steeled her nerves so as not to move a muscle.

"It seems he doesn't live with his wife—that she has left him because of another woman. I guess it was hushed up, but some one not in the secret got wind of it recently. And out of this has grown the story that his domestic relations are irregular—which is being worked underground to discredit him with the respectable rank and file who won't stand for that sort of thing."

"Irregular? You mean that——"

Having pounced on the only particular which she didn't know already, Mary felt her words die away before the peril of seeking to investigate what was so obvious.

"He isn't living with his wife—they've investigated and found that out for sure. I don't know why; but she never appears in public with him; hasn't stood up with him once since he was chosen lieutenant-governor. That's enough to queer him if it's skilfully handled. As to the rest I know nothing; don't care to know."

"It's a cruel story, nevertheless, if it isn't true," she felt impelled to say.

Her visitor waited a moment as if he had been invited to defend himself. "I call it irregular not to be living

with one's wife—not to be seen with her anywhere or ready to explain her absence. That's what's going the rounds. And if a man is living apart from his wife the chances are——”

It was Mr. Bartlett's turn to leave his sentence unfinished lest he mar the proprieties of a pleasant evening. But that he evidently regarded the logic of his commentary as unanswerable was not lost on Mary. The horrible presumption as to what men were likely to do when no one was watching them seemed to dog her at every juncture. Wherever she turned it was there to meet her.

“I don't think highly of that sort of campaign material,” she heard him say. “Those hounding him are the jackals, and if the truth were known, I guess we'd find the story started inside his own party—was told privately by one of his rivals for the nomination in the hope that it would be repeated.”

Here was the old freemasonry—the conspiracy of silence cropping out again; in view of it, Mary could not bear to be misunderstood. “But if it's true, he deserves to have it repeated and to lose votes in consequence.”

Her informant, who evidently believed that he had been taking a high stand, looked nonplussed by her fervor. “He has been losing them,” he answered, and then, by way of escaping from delicate ground, added: “If the election had taken place a week ago, we had him beaten. To-day he has his second wind so to speak; any story becomes stale after a time and there's a reaction. They've a good asset in their new ‘big Injun,’ Henry Ives Thornton, who's spending wads of money and pulling no end of wires to land Randall. There's a curious instance, that man Thornton. Three years ago his name wasn't known politically. He was a pal of

Randall's, who gave him his start, and ever since he has been coming fast by leaps and bounds. If he elects his man, he'll be one of the top notchers."

Having avoided a ticklish subject, brought the conversation back to the real point at issue, and given his fair companion hopes on that score, Mr. Bartlett pulled himself up and added casually: "I don't suppose you know him."

Mary's heart beat faster. She disapproved of falsehoods. "Yes, I've met him."

"Is that so?" Mr. Bartlett looked at her. "Do you know his wife?"

"Yes, I've met her, too."

He laughed and hesitated deprecatingly. "I didn't mean to tell you, but since you know her—it's just gossip—invented probably to fit the case." He lowered his voice as if half-ashamed of his secret. "They claim that she's the woman on whose account Randall's wife left him. Yet Randall and he are pals. That makes it odd all round, doesn't it?"

How small the world seemed and how repugnant the knowledge that the terrible tragedy of her life had become one of the factors in a State-wide political struggle! How strange too, yes exciting, that Stephen Bartlett should know so much and yet be so wholly in the dark! He had led her on to the danger point; and she must rally her wits to preserve her incognito.

"So odd that it sounds impossible."

"That's it exactly, and we'll leave it there." Her prompt acceptance of his cue evidently chimed in with his own prepossessions. He rose as he spoke.

"If you ever hear me described as close-mouthed, and that's my reputation in the circles where I chiefly move—you'll be able to say: 'I know better, he's nothing but an old gossip.'"

"I encouraged you by my questions—and you needn't be afraid that I shall quote you, even to Martin."

It was easy to be self-possessed and debonair with security for her incognito vouchsafed. Nevertheless, though she had extracted what she wished to know and ought to be eager to have him depart, the fascination of playing upon him prompted her to invite the chance for further confidences. "Why are you going? The children will be late at their dance."

He shook his head and took her hand. "I mustn't run any risks where my welcome here is concerned. I like to feel that I can drop in occasionally without intruding because your rooms seem more homelike than mine. You and your children and your tasteful surroundings—they mean so much to me by way of companionship I don't get anywhere else, there's nothing you wish to know that I wouldn't be glad to tell you if I could."

"That's very sweet of you, Mr. Bartlett. We're all very fond of you and depend upon your visits." His simple genuineness touched her and made her feel almost perfidious. "You must drop in whenever you feel inclined." As he bowed his gratified thanks, she summed him up involuntarily—a mysterious little man, lonely and without domestic ties by his own confession, keen as a fox yet monumentally humdrum and almost pathetic withal, but the notorious Steve Bartlett notwithstanding.

As he closed the door behind him Mary felt the thrill of triumph. She had pumped her visitor dry without arousing the least suspicion. Her nerves, which had carried her safely through the ordeal, were tingling pleasantly. She stretched herself upon the lounge as one who seeks to recover breath after a successful adventure.

But only for a few moments were her thoughts ex-

ultant. She had found out what she wished to know. Mr. Bartlett's testimony proved her fears well-founded, that Oliver having sowed the wind was reaping the whirlwind. A week ago he would certainly have been defeated, and, as it was, the result hung perilously in the balance. If he lost, it would be the logically righteous fruit of his misconduct.

Her fears? Did she wish him to win or lose? Mary lay looking at the ceiling, the prey of conflicting emotions. He did not deserve to win; but if he lost, the outcome would be directly due to her. Wincing at the indictment, she shrank from the responsibility, which suddenly seemed so overwhelming that she sat upright in her dismay. She recognized that his defeat would make her miserable. What a quandary this—to have believed all along that it would serve him right and yet at the twelfth hour to be sick at heart lest he fail of election! Her face between her hands, she looked before her moodily. A sorry trick this that destiny was playing on her—that she should “funk”—there was no other word for it—at the very moment when her ideals were being vindicated on the altar of retributive justice. Yet her telltale sensations unmistakably declared that she would be wretched if he did not win.

What could she do—provided she wished to do anything? Nothing unless— For a few roseate moments she pictured a twelfth-hour announcement that the candidate's wife had returned of her own accord and that the stories were false. Too fantastic and too palpable. Besides there must be a limitation. All she could say would be: “To save your prospects and for the children's sake, I will keep house for you, Oliver, and appear with you in public; but that is all.” He would have to be satisfied with that. And he ought to be, she said to herself with emphasis.

He would jump at her offer very likely; but to begin

all over again after six years and yet be separated by a gulf—what would it profit them? She glanced down at the wedding-ring which still encircled her finger. She had simply let it stay there—had ignored its presence—dead symbol as it was. Her birthday was next week; she would be forty-four. Youth was over, but for any woman of that age if she only chose to think so, life was at its prime. She was at her best in the best sense; as capable of loving and emulous of being loved as she had ever been—and who could tell? Mary threw up her head defiantly as if to vouch for the possibilities which the future held. She had salved her wound. To go back would merely reopen it. And on parade as the governor's wife she would be merely a party to an artifice to make the world believe they were not estranged. It would be like the case of the wife (Deborah Palmer was responsible for the story, having heard it from her father, the admiral, years before) who, on the point of leaving her husband for cause, refrained because he had been chosen President. She had always despised the woman for shirking such an opportunity to deal a staggering blow to the conspiracy of silence. No, to return on terms would be a sacrifice in the eyes of the world of all she had championed, and yet be nothing but a sham. As Christabel had insinuated, it must be everything or nothing; and everything was impossible. Impossible, she repeated, though, as she did so, she realized that she flushed and trembled.

So this was settled. And if she didn't go back and he won, he would owe his victory to Henry Thornton. A strange fatality; odd indeed, to quote Mr. Bartlett. Grim rather, from the point of view of her grievous knowledge. Its significance eluded exact definition. The situation seemed to presume mutual trust and amity—that the two men could not be on other than a cordial footing. Yet did she not know only too well

that it was possible to be ignorant of what was going on under one's very eyes? As for that, what reason was there for believing Oliver's private life during the last six years would bear the test of scrutiny?

Mary shivered and bit her lip. The clock on the mantelpiece struck the hour; it was growing late and the children would be returning presently. Of a sudden a question leaped at her which she recognized as having been dormant ever since she had been sitting alone. Suppose it were proved beyond the shadow of doubt that Oliver had been absolutely true to her since they had lived apart, would she be willing to return as a wife to him? She gasped as one who clutches at a straw, but the monitor who kept the drawbridge of her brain retorted quick as a flash like one lying in wait for the opportunity: "How futile to consider this with Steve Bartlett's intimations ringing in your ears!" Disclaiming to know anything positive, had he not volunteered conjecture, taken likelihood for granted? When his confidences were analyzed what did they show him but a naïve apologist for the old vile discrimination which would have one law for the man and another for the woman? It was for her to live pure and undefiled though leagues apart, but a husband might stray as he liked if deprived of his wife, and it did not much matter.

It might be Sybil still, who was receiving his devotion, or it might be some one else, or he might be living the life of a recluse, so far as women were concerned. The burden of proof was on him. With this steady reflection Mary heard with fierce satisfaction the click of the key in the door heralding her children's return. An argument was provided against which Arnold's enthusiasm would assert itself in vain, and which had banished to the background her tender-heartedness on the score of her husband's prospects.

CHAPTER XXV

"NOT going to the inauguration, mother?"

It was Arnold who spoke, with all the emphasis of disappointed youth, grievously surprised.

"No, dear. If you reflect a moment, you will see that I could only attend as the governor's wife. You and Christabel will go and occupy the front seats reserved for you. I should like to see the ceremony, but to be present unobserved or incognito wouldn't be suitable. You must take my word for it."

This comprehensive answer, which served to silence her son, was the outcome of previous travail on Mary's part. The first effect of Oliver's election had been a mixture of joy and relief. He had deserved to lose, and she had not stirred a finger to aid him, but she was spared the uncomfortable responsibility of being an accessory to his defeat, and the victor must have been well aware of why his margin of safety was not larger.

So he was governor-elect after all. For the first few days she had freely joined in the prevalent enthusiasm, dampening neither the enthusiasm of her children by her aloofness nor refraining to abet their sallies at the expense of Mr. Bartlett, the sponsor for the enemy. It was edifying to read the panegyrics. She had devoured them with avidity, one spur of which was latent wonder as to how they would dispose of herself. Arnold fetched newspapers by the score to the apartment. After the daily press had done its fulsome duty, the Sunday editions contributed full-page biography and the weeklies

brought up the rear with various special matter. The walls of Arnold's bedroom were covered with newspaper reproductions of his father's features, some almost life-like, some ludicrously villainous in their artistry. A huge one, the best of the lot, ornamented the mantelpiece in the sitting-room, and was tolerated by her until the excitement subsided (for the eyes seemed to stare at her at times), then quietly banished.

The Benham newspapers without exception glossed over the governor-elect's matrimonial relations. The concerted phrase described him as a benedict, but the particulars vouchsafed were meagre. While his wife's existence was admitted, the reader was given to understand that she was very much in the background. One biography referred to her as living in retirement, another as an invalid. Mary bridled as she read them. Not a hint at their separation, not a paragraph as to her professional career or artistic identity. One of the Sunday issues contained portraits of Arnold and Christabel, which she huddled out of sight lest Mr. Bartlett notice them; but as for direct references to her, the public might have assumed her to be a cipher.

Much as she shrank from notoriety, the deliberate silence was galling. It was clear that the press had been muzzled and prevailed on to keep mum. Unquestionably a considerable number knew the facts, but it had been given out that no one was to tell. Another instance apparently of masculine conspiracy; to suit the exigencies of which she had been virtually annihilated.

How had they managed to keep the truth out of the papers? This was the question she flung at Ham at the first opportunity. "Your friends did it," replied Ham promptly, with an accent that said: "And you ought to be thankful too."

"My friends?" she faltered.

"Every one of them I've met. The whole bunch at the City Club—according to Barbara—except one, Virginia Vose, who was primed to rush into print, but was squelched just in time. That girl has no sense of proportion. She couldn't see that if the whole story came out you'd stand not the ghost of a chance. It would be all up with you."

Among the faithless faithful only Virginia. And then it dawned on Mary. "You mean—because he's governor?"

"Certainly. Ollie's a prominent man in an important place and in line for bigger things to come. After the first flurry of interest public sentiment would have squeezed you flat like a steam roller. And so——"

"You all protected me. Thank you, Ham."

Again her tone betrayed her. They were standing in the Ford library face to face, and she had chosen a moment when Barbara had left the room for a little. The would-be benefactor raised his eyebrows. "If it comes to that, I was trying to protect you both; but you chiefly. It would have hurt you socially, Mary."

The irony of that word "socially"! It was to preserve her social position in the best sense that she had left her husband with the approval of all her friends. Here was an occasion which demanded the courage of one's convictions. "From the point of view of taste I should have found the publicity odious unquestionably, Ham. But I doubt the rest. After all, the facts are undisputed—and he brought them on himself."

"True. And nearly lost the election as a consequence. Isn't that enough?"

"Enough?"

"Whom would it benefit if everybody knew?"

"Then what becomes of principle?" she felt like saying,

but abstained out of sheer hopelessness. The odds against her seemed suddenly so great that they crushed her physically. Here was her quondam champion trying to break to her the relentless truth—as he viewed it—that she was only a woman after all when it came to a test. To do honor to the king, the forces of society would smirch her without a scruple.

“At least they might have given me credit for what I stand for professionally,” she murmured.

“You’ve made a name for yourself in your own line, no one denies that, Mary.”

Between the Scylla of seeming malicious toward Oliver and the Charybdis of personal vanity, it behooved her to steer straight, but she could not help saying: “And it’s my name, not his.”

“The very reason why we’re trying to drop a veil over it for the time being. There’s the whole point. Don’t you see, Mary? That is,” he resumed “unless—until”— He broke off short to formulate: “I might as well tell you that your friend Mrs. Palmer was one of the first to say—I heard her myself, and she doesn’t know me very well: ‘It’s awkward for Mary Arnold, isn’t it? If I were she, I’d swallow my pride and go back. Why, he may be President.’ ”

Mary felt herself blush crimson. “Did Deborah Palmer say that?” she exclaimed. Her heart seemed to sink within her for the first time in her life. They were all deserting her. The only one not hypnotized was Virginia—whom they regarded as a child. She herself was ahead of her time. The rising generation—there was the hope. Then she remembered Christabel and her spirit drooped again. Clothes and self-effacing hero-worship! What was the use of struggling?

“But I stood up for you,” Ham was saying. “I told her I doubted very much if you would go back, espe-

cially as you hadn't already gone. And then we both agreed that he couldn't blame you."

Blame her? How artless the assurance! This was Ham's idea of standing up for her. Dear, trusty, but reactionary Ham, despite his one noble performance. No need to ask: "Would you advise me to go back?" The answer was forestalled; she could picture the wrinkles work in his broad face while he pondered the question. Just because Oliver was on the top of the wave and might be President, her individuality was to count for nothing—every concession must come from her. "Especially as you hadn't already." What this meant was clear as crystal. And on her part—just to hear what he would say—why not tell him what she had meditated? It might put her right with him, since he professed to stand up for her—if indeed she still cared whether he did or not. Then something gripped her, and at the bidding of a strange, feverish longing for exculpation, she heard herself say:

"At the time when the election was so close, I divined the reason for it, and nearly did go back. I nearly offered to, that is."

Ham's face lit up with joyous expectation. "Ollie would have welcomed you with open arms."

Mary shrank instinctively from the metaphor and put out her hand to stay his enthusiasm. "I didn't when it came to the point and never shall now. You were right in saying so to Mrs. Palmer. But I'm glad to have the opportunity to tell you I considered it." She paused a moment. Somehow the confidence was not so easy as she had thought. "You see it would have been only to save appearances. The children—Arnold especially—urged me to, and I began to ask myself whether it wouldn't be fairer to them, and, considering what he had at stake, to him if I returned and

seemed to be his wife. That's all I ever thought of doing, Ham."

She wished to be explicit and had begun in the hope that he would credit her with magnanimity, but the short and guttural "I see" with which Ham received her announcements made her uneasy. The more so, as instead of asking further questions he walked to the sofa and established himself in one corner with the air of one who has nothing more to say. Watching him as he reached for a book, she divined that he was annoyed and was imposing control on himself. His demeanor piqued her. She had purposed to tell him why she had decided the arrangement would be impracticable, and she wished him to hear. Accordingly she said:

"I rather think you're right; he would have been glad to have me back on any terms. But I——"

The voice of Barbara calling up from half-way downstairs a last good night to one of the children broke in upon Mary's explanation. She would be here in a moment and the precious opportunity lost.

Ham evidently realized this too, for tossing the book aside he sat up straight and levelled his brows at her: "I call such a proposition barbarous, and, as you say, Ollie would have been fool enough to accept it."

She colored at his vehemence. She had been on the point of telling him, if he had given her time, that she had realized they could not be happy together on such a footing. Yet fascination bade her not interrupt this spontaneous utterance of the masculine point of view.

"See here, Mary, we've only a minute, so there's no use beating about the bush. I'm one of your greatest admirers, as I've told you many times and I'm ready enough to lend an ear to your theories. But when you propose to a man to——" Balked by the difficulties of his theme and the need of haste, Ham halted for an instant, then went

on desperately: "The American woman's a wonder, as all the world admits. But do you realize how foreigners are apt to criticise her in private? They claim she's cold sexually—that something which the women of the older civilizations share is left out of her and that she mistakes the lack of it for virtue. I've always believed that they didn't understand her; but if it's true, it throws light on all sorts of things—even the frequency of our divorces. It's not so long ago that she ought to forget altogether that the primitive man chased the primitive woman and was apt to drag her round by the hair of the head."

Barbara's hand was on the door-knob before he finished and as she entered Mary turned her head away to hide the flush which these remarks had produced. It was no wonder that Barbara noticed the abrupt silence and inquired: "What are you two discussing so earnestly?" To this Ham had the effrontery to reply: "I was merely delicately reminding Mary that if the modern woman tries to tinker with nature, she's bound to come a cropper."

Fortunately Barbara, who was preoccupied with her new play, was satisfied with this. "Delicately indeed!" Mary believed in plain speaking, but there was a limit to everything. For some reason Ham in talking to her of late seemed to be going to the very limits of frankness. His confidence about the governess whom he dismissed had been disillusionizing and would have disgusted her had she not appreciated that he was purposely making the most of the incident. That conversation had been near the line; but on this occasion he had stepped completely over it.

And deliberately too. There could be no question as to that. He had looked straight at her—almost glowered in fact, and, though he evidently believed the

foreign misconception regarding American women to be false, had introduced it for her special benefit. The general taunt itself was not to be taken seriously of course. Cold? Lacking in sex intensity? The American woman was moral and self-respecting; she recognized her obligation to recruit the race, and she rejoiced in wedlock as the acme of human happiness; but she drew the line sharply on lust. This was what the foreigner cavilled at, and the complaint was really a certificate of character. The Ford régime had prospered, and it did not matter much that there were two children younger than the twins—a family of six—seeing that Ham had been ready to mother them and there was plenty of money to go round. At the same time, but for the fortunate interchange of responsibilities, Ham's uxoriousness, as she realized at the time, would have ruined Barbara's career.

But the charge was personal. Ham evidently believed that she— How inadequately he understood her, merely because she was not carnal-minded! Mary realized that notwithstanding the peculiarity of their conversation, she was almost sorry Barbara had interrupted them, for she was still burning to exclaim: "Will you guarantee that Oliver has been as true to me all these years as I to him? If you can, I might be able to go back." What would the answer be? Would he not dodge, equivocate? Would he be straightforward like Mr. Bartlett: "When a man is living separate from his wife, the chances are"—? The foreign woman took this for granted, and even the church winked at it, glossing over illicit relations to condemn divorces. But the American wife, declining to be hoodwinked or brow-beaten, refused to condone license.

The chance to have the matter out with Ham was lost never to recur, for he had trenched on impropriety under

the spur of excitement and she would not suffer him to go so far again. But though she thought she had disposed of his outburst, Mary still felt ruffled, so much so that she pleaded a headache and returned home early. She could not easily dismiss Ham's evident disapproval. Her suggestion of returning to Oliver as a wife merely in name had plainly irritated him. What had made him so captious? This was the second time he had shown temper on this score, as witness his petulance at poor Virginia Vose's scientific data. It seemed as if he believed her unfair to Oliver, and traced the beginnings of that unfairness back to their years of life together.

Mary racked her mind for an explanation of this, and suddenly the whole tide of Sybil's venomous tirade of years before flowed into it as from a secret reservoir opened to ruin her belief in her blameless justice toward her husband. For Sybil's strictures, though a poignant memory in that every word of the encounter was seared upon her soul, had never since she had dismissed them at the time of her separation as baseless, seriously disturbed her equanimity. If she had asked herself in moments of depression later whether her conduct had contributed to the bitter result, the effect of reviewing the vicious charges had been to strengthen her conviction that they were inherently malicious as well as false. If it is too much to aver that she did not think of them occasionally, she was at least not consciously haunted by them.

But now her brooding spirit seemed suddenly put on the defensive by the detection of a resemblance between what Ham had said and Sybil's diatribes. Somehow the phraseology, in which she was so letter-perfect, of that memorable interview took on a fresh meaning and she found herself dwelling on it. Neglect of Oliver and failure to appreciate him—this was the gravamen

of Sybil's attack; but she had gone further and insinuated worse things. "Starved" was the word she had used; uttered, as Mary vividly recalled, with an ironical, contemptuous note, which had been baffling at the moment.

The similarity between Ham's insinuation and Sybil's charge grew on Mary and her cheeks burned fiercely; If Sybil's meaning had not fully dawned on her before they parted, she had comprehended shortly afterward its salacious insolence. But this reinforcement from the mouth of Ham had given it new life. What had come over Ham? He was a good man, and yet apparently he had gone out of his way to join the forces of evil in league against her. Indeed his manner had been undisguisedly partisan, as if he had come to the conclusion that Oliver had been aggrieved all along. The episode and its associations were very disconcerting, to say the least. Between humiliation and resentment, Mary passed a sleepless night. But by the morning she had reached the conclusion that her only recourse was to ignore the indignity, avoid such conversations in future, even though this deprived her of Ham's counsel, and thrust the uncongenial train of thought into the deepest recesses of her mind.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE inauguration of Oliver Randall as governor took place a month later. Until the claim on her attention became personal, Mary had scarcely realized that the ceremony was so august. For several days in advance events conspired to exalt the dignity of the office. The press made much of the preparations, and her immediate circle was in a flutter. The children, who had resigned themselves to her decision not to attend the inaugural exercises, became more and more imbued as the date drew nearer with the importance of their status. As the governor's daughter and an occupant of a front seat in the visitors' gallery, it was incumbent on Christabel to order a new and elegant costume which her mother was expected to admire. Mary was not sure whether she found it harder to bear their artless ardor or the efforts of Barbara and Ham to conceal that they were bubbling over with anticipation. Even Mr. Bartlett appeared mournful because he was obliged to be in New York and consequently could not swell the ranks of the elder statesmen who would foregather at the Capitol. As for the Jerrold sisters, Carrie was coming to stay with Deborah on purpose to be present, and neither would miss the occasion for anything. Mary had waited for an opportunity to take Mrs. Palmer to task for the remark ascribed to her by Ham, but was anticipated by the effusive embrace which said only too plainly: "You can't be there, of course, dear; we understand, and we respect your principles; but it's hard luck!" This was equivalent to commiseration, yet

nothing would be gained by remonstrating. To spoil their satisfaction by cavilling at their eagerness to attend the ceremonial would stamp her as petty.

It was to be a red-letter day; one when the admirers of the governor-elect thronging to pay him the tribute of congratulations would vie with one another in enthusiasm. Yet the woman, who in the natural order of things would have been the most jubilant of all, was so little in touch with what was to take place that those looking forward to the event felt constrained to disguise their feelings while talking to her. Yes, Oliver had succeeded; won a position in the public eye which ranked him as a personage. There was no blinking this. Now that it had come to pass, the anomaly was that she herself had no part in it.

Her predicament suggested that she must have underestimated Oliver's capacity. His swift promotion could scarcely be accounted for without admitting that he possessed greater intellectual abilities than she had credited to him. But while acknowledging that she owed him a mental apology, Mary shook her head at the thought that Ollie could ever be considered great—even though he were chosen President. He had been lucky perhaps, but he had risen steadily and she had failed to appreciate that he could rise so fast and so far; perhaps this had been stupid on her part; but after everything was said Ollie could not be regarded as possessing genius. Indeed, her own talents had more of that quality than his. But it was his day, and all the world of both sexes, except the woman to whom he had promised to be faithful for life, were tagging after his chariot-wheels. A fine position to be governor of the State—more exalted than she had supposed until it was brought home to her. Women were at a cruel disadvantage in this respect; the men held all the high offices of place and power.

Even in the world of religion the worshippers hung upon the lips of men; there were no female priests or clergymen. Would the day ever come when a woman would be inaugurated governor of the State?

Mary's thoughts while she sat at home alone on the morning when the ceremony was taking place were thus interchangeably wistful and bitter. On the return of the children she listened to their comments with an attention which she perceived to be far from perfunctory. All the world had been present and in their best bib and tucker, so Christabel declared, rattling off the names of the various people she had recognized. The applause which had greeted her father when he entered was tremendous, and the table below the platform from which he delivered his inaugural was heaped with flowers. After the exercises he had sent for them to visit his private quarters—the gubernatorial chamber—and shown them everything. A spacious, ornate place, with divans and huge easy chairs of lustrous leather which swallowed one up, and ornate state emblems on the walls. Father had given her a huge box of sweets sent him by some anonymous admirer (Arnold exhibited it as she spoke), and in the corridors on the way out they had fallen in with various friends. Who one of them had been Mary shrewdly suspected, not only from the girl's telltale manner, but from the roses she wore, which were not there when she left the house. It was unnecessary to inquire whether the ubiquitous Mr. Rivers had lingered to walk home with her. Already the child had opened the box of bonbons and was munching chocolates with an avidity which foretold that they would be finished before night.

"Do have some, mother. They're the real thing."

The eternal inveterate feminine point of view, and how depressing! In order to please her daughter, Mary helped herself gingerly and repressed a sigh. The bon-

bon was indeed delicious; clearly the anonymous donor had sent the choicest which the market provided. Thus reflecting, she mechanically took another as she listened to Arnold give his version by filling the gaps left by his sister's impressionist recital. He had been stirred by the surging crowd and his proximity to the dignitaries. The ceremony was of a piece with the crowning of a king in the presence of the noblest of the land, with the substitution of the plain and patriotic people for obsequious courtiers. He too had thrilled at the ovation accorded his father, and as for the inaugural, it was masterly and had been enthusiastically received. In passing out he had overheard many compliments for it. In conclusion he added: "Father was at his best. He has a lot of new ideas, but he praised the other side for certain things and showed his usual independence. I wish you could have heard him, mother."

From behind a curtain and undetected, yes. Mary had already acknowledged to herself this desire. The boy's enthusiasm was infectious in spite of his determination to set his father on a pedestal. Later she made no pretense of not devouring the newspapers. The enumeration in print showed that Oliver's old friends had turned out in force to do him honor—several, like David Parks and Henry Bailey, coming from a distance. She depicted in her mind's eye the George Pattersons very near the throne, and prodigal of unctuous felicitations. She suspected Nettie of being the donor of the box of delectable sweets. As for good old Everett Dean, he must be the happiest man in Benham, and was entitled to be dubbed both a Warwick and a soothsayer.

When she came to Sybil's name Mary realized why she was so curious. The children had made no allusion to their late "aunt." Other things being equal, it was unlikely that she would remain away, and other things

were very far from equal, seeing that as Mrs. Henry Thornton she was the wife of the henchman to whom the governor-elect was most beholden. No wonder that she had been given a front seat not very remote from the family and was awarded more space by the reporters than any other woman. Her attire was described with a minuteness which would ordinarily have been reserved for the governor's wife, and the chroniclers had been lavish of complimentary adjectives concerning her appearance, which always included "queenly." Though all this was accounted for by her husband's political aspirations, Mary as she read experienced an odd sensation of animosity. The crowning touch of irony was imparted by a snapshot with the camera of Sybil leaving the Capitol sandwiched between the Jerrold sisters, beneath which was the paragraph that she disputed with her close friend, Mrs. Clifford Palmer, social leadership of the exclusive set to which they both belonged.

While the pageant and the subsequent publicity attendant on a new administration lasted, Mary felt herself a helpless victim of the force of circumstances—circumstances which seemed both unjust and wicked. The position which she might have filled was vacant, and by her refusal to condone evil, she had been condemned to a fate which was none the less ostracism because her associates were considerate on the surface. Oliver was on a pedestal, and her refusal to share it with him, which only the other day had been deemed a virtue, was looked on now by a time-serving world as an idiosyncrasy. So it seemed at least, though she accused herself of being morbid. And then just at the moment when the social universe seemed to her most out of gear—some few weeks after the inauguration—two signal honors were bestowed on Mary in quick succession. She was chosen a trustee of the Benham Art

Museum, the first of her sex to hold the office; and a fortnight later was awarded the gold medal of the Ceramic Club (now a flourishing organization with the voice of authority) for distinguished accomplishment of national repute in landscape-architecture.

These tributes arrived in the nick of time to salve Mary's self-respect and to serve as the answer of society to the pressure which had been exercised on her. It was her turn to be a celebrity; to read her biography and behold her countenance in the public prints. She walked once more on even terms with the world and received the congratulations showered on her at the City Club with a sense of amusement that would have been cynical had she not been so radiant. She said to herself that not even her well-meaning friends had been able to keep her down, and she forgave them. The governor had become, so to speak, an old story, and for the moment she held the centre of the local stage.

It entertained her too to observe how the press handled the dilemma. The official announcements in large type read in every instance Mrs. Mary Arnold, which for the artistic world was sufficient. But presently, as if the joke were too good to be kept, even though the editors were pledged to secrecy, items crept into print to the effect that the public would be interested to know that the recipient of the gold medal, who had also been recently chosen a trustee of the Art Museum, was no other than the governor's wife. Mary would have preferred to retain her incognito even at the expense of being thought an invalid as hitherto, but the leakage was diverting nevertheless, for she half suspected her well-meaning friends of trying to frustrate the conspiracy of silence. Finally one of the "yellow" journals broke loose and published in its Sunday edition a flaming article which eulogized herself and wound up with the

bald statement that "Mrs. Mary Arnold, who was formerly Mrs. Oliver Randall, has for several years lived apart from her distinguished husband."

At last the truth was out. Now all the world who chose to read to the end, would know the facts. And she had had no hand in divulging it. The article had come to her attention only because some one had cut it out and sent it anonymously. Her first idea was to show it to the children. Then she asked herself what would be gained. They nursed a secret hope of reconciliation, and the unvarnished truth would merely grieve them. The unvarnished truth! As she reread the text surrounding her picture in the garish supplement, Mary was conscious of a qualm of disillusion. The fact of living apart from her husband seen in cold print did not look appealing. A smirch—this was what the majority who read the statement and did not know the merits would regard it. Publicity of this kind somehow tarnished a woman however blameless. It was unjust, and yet she longed to buy up the whole edition of the offending paper. Crumpling it in her hand, Mary threw the cutting into the fire.

Fortunately, the children never saw the article; or, if they did, refrained from speaking of it. And what of Mr. Bartlett? Mary could not feel positive, for it was perfectly consistent with her knowledge of him either that he should fail to associate the Mary Arnold whom he knew with the governor's wife, unless it were forced on his attention, or should be cognizant of everything, yet give no sign. So far as appeared he was none the wiser for what had been let out by the press. He had been delighted by her double laurels and had spoken of her picture in the newspapers.

With the honors thus more even between her and Oliver, Mary took up life again with comparative zest.

Instead of being crushed by force of circumstances, it appeared that she had been vindicated by them after all. Much as her children might desire a reconciliation between her and their father—they had received tangible proofs of what the community thought of her. He had distinguished himself, but she had also made her mark, and was entitled to hold her head high. After reading Oliver's inaugural she had felt depressed, and by analysis had traced this to the complexity of some of his subjects. She had never forgotten taking down one of his law reports early in their married life and finding it easy reading. But taxation and the tariff (with which the address bristled) nettled her and made her wonder if it were possible that he was getting ahead of her. But now the retort was obvious. Oliver knew nothing about artistic dimensions or landscape-architecture. Her problems were different from his. And as for accomplishment, several of the show places of the country were substantial witnesses to her talents.

The dignity of her soul was rehabilitated. Yet, as the weeks and months passed, Mary realized that her mind, like a mirror, was reflecting varied moods—this day an untroubled horizon, the next a sky flecked with vague discontent. She ought to be happy, but was she? She had faced her problem, and the serious world thought none the less of her for not having flinched from it. They had crowned her as an artist and ignored the personal factor as irrelevant. But the latter concerned her even more deeply than the former. Each was meant to be a contribution to higher living from the point of view of sex; but were they not inseparably correlated? Matrimonial failure became an aureole if it denoted progress, but one should be free from spectres. As an example intended for other women in search of happiness to imitate, it must be invulnerable to every test.

Yet her example had been twice challenged—challenged in terms which were like stabs at the heart, for they disputed her capacity to drink deep at the fountain of life and insultingly declared her powers of joyous self-surrender atrophied. That the taunt rankled was plain to her intelligence, since it returned to haunt her at unexpected moments from the recesses to which she had banished it. The very quality on which she had prided herself—the essence of the sex relation idealized but deepened—was impugned. Two people—a man and a woman—both believed this and had reproached her. Did her husband believe it? If he were given a chance to speak, would this be his excuse for his infidelity? This was the suspicion which now knocked at the door under the guise of the query whether she were lonely. An invidious, humiliating thought which made her flush with shame. For oh, the irony of having given such an impression and being powerless to dissipate it. She, who as a would-be acolyte of love, had dedicated herself to tending the lamp night and day!

Out of the corner of her eye, as the months slipped past, Mary watched the governor. Occupied as she was with more interests than ever, nothing escaped her, and she had ceased to pretend that she observed only by chance. She owned herself as frankly curious. Was he really a man of ideas? How far would he go without her? Had she underrated his attainments after all?

The first six months of the session passed without throwing much light on the subject. The important bills were in committee and the gubernatorial resources were but lightly tested. Yet there were rumors rife of impending embarrassment for the party in power because of a resolution offered to investigate the dealings of the commission charged with the building of the new and ornate State Capitol.

Sixty days later this measure had acquired an importance which dwarfed everything else political. The resolution passed after a heated debate, but might have been rejected, so those most eager to kill it declared, had Governor Randall used his secret influence against inquiry into the alleged misdoings of those of his own faith. His attitude was unequivocal, that if there had been corruption—and this was the sinister charge—it ought to be shown up.

In the week following the passage of the resolution authorizing the investigation came the retirement of Guy Bonner from the Senate of the United States in order to accept a cabinet portfolio in the national administration. It was a burning question who would be his successor. Mary wondered if Oliver were not the so-called logical choice, adding: "Luck seems to follow him." The early editorial comment seemed to take for granted that the governor could have the position for the asking and the probability that he would seek it. Arnold's eyes were ablaze with the prospect that his father was going to Washington to become a national figure. Prominence there might readily put him in line for the presidency and vindicate the prophets. But before Mary decided whether she was pleased or sorry the press revealed a change of sentiment. It was reported that Governor Randall would refuse to resign while his party was under fire and that the aspirations of Henry Ives Thornton for the high honor,—a comparatively new man in the party service, but the most available under all the circumstances,—would have his support.

Sybil the wife of a United States senator, and later at the Court of St. James or even at the White House! This was the panorama which the new suggestion evoked for Mary. Oliver was debarred from acceptance—a chivalrous decision doubtless; but that he should throw

his influence in favor of Henry Thornton was nothing short of confession that unconsciously he had been wheedled into such support. Indisputably Sybil must be responsible. He had done this to please her. The millionaire had no special qualification for the position except his wealth. Ostensibly the choice was a bare-faced reward for personal service; but was not the real explanation to be found far deeper?

The thought was the last straw for the burden of Mary's patience, and yet on the surface there was nothing to lay hold of. From the point of view of allegiance and party politics it was plausible and would pass muster. In her disapprobation Mary applied to Mr. Bartlett. Was it obligatory that Governor Randall should refuse the senatorship? The complaint was genuine; she could not bear the thought now that he was to be supplanted. She scarcely cared if she betrayed her identity to her astute fellow lodger.

Mr. Bartlett, as usual, prefaced his reply with silence. When he broke this it was manifest he had been making one last effort to conjure up some loophole for Oliver. "Lots of men would grab the office—a lucky opportunity likely to occur only once in a lifetime—and let the party go hang. But I knew from the first he wouldn't quit and leave his successor to face the music. I'm sorry too; it's tough on Randall, for the music won't be any too sweet before it's over. Those who regard the bill for an inquiry as a four-flushing expedition will find they're very much mistaken." He nodded significantly as if glad to confide so much to some one he could trust. "It's an ill wind that blows nobody good, however," he added with a smile. "Thornton's no fool, but it's one chance in a million when a man is shown into the front seat in the synagogue before he has even cut his political wisdom-teeth."

Mary found out before they parted that the choice by the legislature would not be for several months and there would probably be other candidates. But the result was foreshadowed; Sybil would go to Washington and Oliver be left in the lurch. In this event they would be separated at least, but Sybil would owe her husband's promotion to him. Not that it mattered except for the enormity that evil should seem to triumph, and to laugh in the face of the defeated wife. Once more the world appeared discouragingly out of joint. Mary had noticed too the ominous intimation of trouble brewing for Oliver. Well, he deserved it, whatever it might be. And Sybil as usual would slip away just in time.

To counteract this hateful reflection, Mary neglected none of her activities and welcomed new ones. During the weeks before the date fixed for the choice of senator she became preoccupied by an inspiring hope—that of permanent world-wide peace under the special auspices of women. The password was that mankind had made a mess of things, God knew (one had merely to count off a score of horrible modern wars), and it was time for woman to try her hand. This epizootic movement, emanating from the far West and the far East of the country at the same moment, had travelled with such speed as even to try the resources of the Jerrold sisters, who, having got wind in time, as they believed, were nevertheless at their wit's end to make ready for it. The result was that Pittsburgh and Benham felt the thrill at the same moment, and Carrie, forced to stay at home, could not grace the platform when Deborah presided.

Nevertheless the local movement was inaugurated most successfully, so it seemed to Mary, who attended the meeting and was chosen one of the four vice-presidents for Benham. The key-note of the occasion was

struck by Mrs. Selma White, as she styled herself, three times a wife and at the moment the widow of "Ex-Governor" and "Ex-Senator" Lyons, having resumed her maiden name as a sort of tribute by the passing generation to the new feminism. A tall, snowy-haired woman with the expression of a worried archangel and regally attired for the occasion, she epitomized the remedy for martial conflict by the telling phrase "elimination of force." Wars were the creatures of force and force must disappear. She called on women to band themselves together throughout the universe—an endless chain of tireless women—to bring in this blessed panacea. And when, as she paused, some male miscreant in the gallery inquired: "How, old girl, if the despots and the big-bugs and the wild animals won't listen?"—clear and persuasive as a cathedral chime came her reply: "They will have to listen; we will make them. Woman, if she chooses, can accomplish anything. If they persist, we will refuse to bear children."

Mary left the meeting all aglow in response to this address and the ensuing remarks of others. She had met Mrs. Selma White previously, but had never before heard her speak. She felt lifted to a higher plane by this denunciation of force as the arch-enemy of civilized progress. What a blessed place the world might be without it! How beneficent the vista of an endless chain of feminine influence as a substitute for mere muscle and brute strength!

It was a rare afternoon with a balmy touch of spring in keeping with her transfigured mood. As she turned her steps toward the Art Museum, a few blocks distant, the kindling vision of a feminized universe brought to mind a passage she had come across some years earlier in a curious volume at the library of the Ceramic Club. The book was a recent translation into English of a

Chinese Marco Polo's observations on the Chinese and Arabic trade of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, written almost contemporaneously; oddly enough, as she opened it for the first time, her eyes had met an extract descriptive of a country inhabited solely by women who "conceive by exposing themselves naked to the full force of the south wind and so give birth to female children."

A fantastic, semifabulous legend, without foundation no doubt, yet fascinating withal. She had reasoned at the time that it contained the essence of an idea, if not the possibility of literal truth. The boys were killed at birth—so the Asiatic traveller went on to chronicle. This might be correct—or was it merely masculine invention endeavoring to solve the marvellous? At least the narrative was evidence as to what the prehistoric woman thought attainable or dreamed of; and Mary reflected as she pursued her way that, with allowances for subsequent progress, it fitted admirably into the twentieth-century programme to which she had just listened. Force was to be dispensed with by virtue of the attributes which woman held within herself, until now latent and but feebly exercised. As one of the other speakers at the meeting put it, the era was at hand when policemen would seem a menace and hence superfluous.

An iridescent dream? Nay, there was surely something in it. Mrs. Selma White had demonstrated this beyond peradventure. Mary pledged herself in advance to the new movement, the dreamy impulse of which still possessed her as she crossed the portal of the Art Museum. It had become her habit to come there, since her appointment as trustee, occasionally to inspect, to enjoy, and to meditate. She knew the exhibits already by heart and guided by the thread of her

fancy she sought the gallery which contained the casts of the world's masterpieces of statuary, yet paused on the threshold to observe at short range a group of three feminine art students each intent upon her easel. They were copying—and what? Two of them the Theseus and the Centaur of Canova, the other the Perseus and Medusa of Benvenuto Cellini.

Mary smiled sadly. There under her very eyes was the eloquent object-lesson she was looking for. The entire display she was facing symbolized first of all the glorification of force. The brute power of man and his ability to maim and slay were written large and everywhere on the artistic output of the ages. Beginning with mythology and continuing to modern times, exemplars of masculine might immortalized by plastic genius frowned down proudly on her from their pedestals from every angle of the spacious gallery—Hercules or satyr, Samson or gladiator, Viking or knight of the mailed fist—they were all essentially alike. And what was woman's rôle among them—for she freely figured there? That of the suppliant, the rescued, the insipidly modest, the tantalizing, the amorously seductive. Weak, beautiful, and frail—there was man's measure of her in undying marble and bronze for the art student of her own sex to contemplate and copy. Oh, the indignity and humiliation of the libel when spell-bound no longer by the marvels of technique one read its true import!

Led by the train of thought thus set in motion, Mary wandered slowly through the trio of connecting galleries which contained the statuary—graded from the classical to the contemporaneous—studying the types. She proceeded from sheer wantonness, as it were, for to her perception intent on the analysis each figure or group seemed more convincing than the last. Stripped of

their minor differences, these heroes and worthies wore a family likeness. But happily their reign was at an end, for they belonged to a vanished or vanishing world. Worshipped still because of beauty of execution, the hour had come when from the point of view of eternal wisdom and of sex philosophy they had become mainly curiosities. The galleries were for the people; why should not this object-lesson be conveyed by some appropriate text or labelling? Mary resolved to take up the point promptly with her associates. To most of them it would be a new and doubtless a startling thought; there would be difficulties, but there was surely the kernel of a much needed reform in the proposal.

So musing she made the round, and leaving the last of the three galleries appropriated to sculpture, she retraced her steps by way of the main corridor. Just before reaching the doorway of the room originally entered, a young man advancing from the opposite direction stepped in ahead of her. Wishing to take another glimpse of the art students whom she had noticed, Mary following arrived in time to see him look over his shoulder for an instant as he walked down the room, then proceed, and simultaneously she heard a sound which seemed incongruously familiar in such a setting. Divining the source, she turned reproachfully in its direction. The trio of art students had suspended work and were eating their luncheon on the base of the pedestal of the Theseus and the Centaur of Canova. Their eyes were following the youth, and as he disappeared the girls exchanged with one another glances of fatuous, self-conscious, and artificial merriment, the audible expression of which had already reached her. What she had heard was a giggle, which disgusted her and then depressed her inordinately, taking the sunshine out of the atmosphere. In these associations dedicated to serious workmanship it was

sheer debasement. There was no escape from the trail of sex.

For a moment Mary thought of admonishing the girls; but they would not understand. This was the dismal factor in the case. The incident had spoiled her happy day, for one of the girls reminded her of Christabel in appearance, and the haunting thought obtruded itself that her only daughter in spite of hints and precautions was determined to marry the indistinguishable Mr. Rivers, the first man who had asked her, and contribute next to nothing to the new generation.

She turned and left the group without a word, hoping, however, that they had gathered from her expression some inkling of her feelings. Once more in the exhilarating fresh air Mary fiercely plucked a moral from her discomfiture. The elimination of force to be successful presupposed a counterpart—the disappearance of the giggle. Woman must cease to giggle involuntarily and aimlessly if she would escape from the ignoble posture in which man-made art had sculptured her. This seemed clear and obligatory. Nevertheless the definition failed to restore Mary's serenity, and somehow those coquettish art students had managed to trample down the sunflowers in her new-found Eden. Women need not giggle, but they persisted in doing so, and force would continue to flourish and get the better of them until they changed. Changed? There was the hope—an equitable self-respecting equivalent. And then upon her yearning spirit descended the blight of the mocking challenge—suppose they were designed to be like that, and can never be materially different; were born so and will never change?

Mary quickened her steps and straightened her figure in resentment of the fatalistic query. Yet as she proceeded she looked neither to right nor left, and it seemed

to her that she had never before felt so utterly depressed. A sudden nostalgia for all to which her life was dedicated seized her. What was the use of trying to reform anything, and most of all man who needed improvement most of all? What was the use if the very gods rewarded her with ironic laughter? There was a man-made heaven, it seemed, as well as a man-made earth.

Chewing the dust of her despondency, she hastened onward, remembering only that she must make some minor purchases before the shops closed. Shaping her course to this end, yet oblivious of her whereabouts, she was recalled to reality by the strident voices of newsboys who accompanied the proffer of their wares with words of startling import that caused her to stand stock-still and shake off fantasy. She saw that she was in front of the *Benham Sentinel* and being jostled by the crowd gathering to read the tidings just chalked upon the news board.

"Henry Ives Thornton succumbs to pneumonia. Favorite candidate for United States senatorship expires at noon to-day"—so ran the appalling record.

Mary's head swam as she comprehended the dire announcement. How distressing and how sudden. She had not heard that Henry was ill. It could not be that he was cut off in his prime. Yet there were the grim head-lines staring her in the face. Then it was over as to Washington, poor fellow, and Sybil was a widow. A widow—and free. The unworthiness of such a thought at such a moment—as if the ironic gods were bent on torturing her—filled her eyes with tears. With trembling hand she bought a newspaper from an eager urchin, then stared at the news board again.

Only too cruelly true, alas! Mary realized that she was weeping. In spite of everything he was an old friend who had loved her once and given her her first

start in her career. She need not be ashamed of tears. As she read mechanically another item of major public interest riveted her attention and again she started. "Sensational exposures promised in the State House investigation. A million of the public money pocketed through fraudulent contracts!"

Mary clinched her hands before the ominous recital. A second piece of evil news—which spelled calamity for Oliver. How strange that these two appalling new-born facts should be so closely linked together! Henry Thornton dead, and Oliver—if the threat was proved—the scapegoat of popular indignation. He would be ousted and made to pay the penalty of the party chicanery because he was its chieftain. To be a yearling governor for such a cause might well blast his whole career. A sob was in her throat. She turned away feeling she could not bear the threatened outcome. It would not be fair, and he so honest. Whatever his demerits, this at least was true—he was honest as the sun. He had never winked at corruption. Honest? At any rate, in money matters, and this concerned them solely. Mary gulped the palpable discrimination down, as one who does so wilfully to spite her conscience.

Her firmament seemed changed and while she walked she strove to find her bearings. She would miss Henry Thornton greatly—and as for Oliver, it would be lamentable if he had to suffer for the misdeeds of others. He might be senator now; there was no one in the way. At the vision her mind recurred to Sybil. What would be her attitude? Would she try to make Oliver senator? Would she not in the present crisis endeavor to aid him? Her muff before her face, Mary compressed her lip to check the rising consternation. There was no telling; it was futile to consider. But to dwell on the likelihood was self-torture. Then suddenly the thought

projected itself that two could play at that game. Why not forestall her? He need never know, and if he should find out, the knowledge would be to him as coals of fire.

For a moment the possibility possessed her joyously, flaring like a torch which irradiates a dark chamber; then expired before the woe-begone consciousness of her own utter helplessness. The opportunities were all on the side of Sybil, who was in politics and knew how to pull the wires. For an instant Mary had felt herself very near to Oliver through her spasmodic voluntary impulse to rescue him. Now he dwindled—they were wide apart once more; and she was face to face again with stern reality.

Yet as she pursued her way soberly through the gathering dusk, Mary was conscious that her world had changed in more respects than one. Out of her concern at Henry Thornton's death and the imminence of the peril which threatened the Randall administration had emerged a shy yet resolute state of mind which made her step elastic. Of this she was sure and she was no longer ashamed to own it to herself—that she was longing to help Oliver if she could. The ancillary but more baffling consideration was—how?

CHAPTER XXVII

SYBIL THORNTON lay among her cushions musing on the uncertainties of life. She had been six months a widow, and with the instinct common to all of us was appraising what was left to her; but by the inverse process of reviewing the past, characteristic of a mind always eager to avoid looking the future squarely in the face. Existence for her meant the immediate present, and the barometer of her spirits told her on this afternoon that she was a little better.

The calamity which had robbed her of her husband had dazed and prostrated her. It had come so inauspiciously as well as suddenly—at the moment when they were both absorbed in securing for him the fruition of their joint hopes, the coveted honor of a United States senatorship. She had learned to love him fondly too; she missed him every moment. They were such good comrades, and supplemented each other admirably. They were a well-mated team with everything to live for, and if they had gone to Washington she would have handled the diplomats in Henry's favor. It was too cruel and unfortunate.

She had cried her eyes out—but that was of no use; tears would not bring him back. It seemed so strange that he should have been carried out of his own house—this veritable palace, and she remain as sole proprietor. With the exception of a few gifts to charity, he had left her everything without reserve. She was extremely rich, and the final proof of his attachment had been this manifestation of confidence. She was broken-hearted—but she did not wish to die; for physically she was very well

and not quite forty-two. She might live many years. At her saddest moment she had never aspired to be a Sutte. A queer reflection even now—she commented—but it confirmed her consciousness that it was time to piece together the broken strands of her existence.

Sybil had passed the summer months in seclusion at "Foxgrove" and had returned to town only the day before. She had sent for Oliver Randall, who was coming to tea. Before her departure from Benham she had seen him a number of times. He had been very serviceable and considerate, and in order to arrange her affairs had spent a week-end at "Foxgrove" in July. Henry had made him his executor and it had been requisite that he should obtain her signature to various papers, her reading of which had been wholly perfunctory. After taking in that everything was hers to deal with as she wished—and even this knowledge had failed to interest her at the outset—she had shrunk from details and purposely left the settlement of all matters of administration to him. But latterly she had experienced a sense of obligation to know more of her affairs and simultaneously her gratitude to her husband for having confided her interests to such capable hands had been tinged by wonder at the anomaly of the selection. Now that she had dried her eyes, viewing the choice from behind the ambush of her widow's weeds, its ironical lack of fitness could not be ignored. It was hardly to be supposed that if poor Henry had known the facts he would not have picked out some one else.

Yet he had not, and on the surface the choice was logical. Oliver Randall was an experienced lawyer, well qualified to be an adviser, and the political association of the last seven years had bound the two men so closely together that no one not in the secret

would be surprised. It was simply fate. Sybil phrased this conclusion as one who faces a congenial reality for which she is not responsible. She was glad, but she need feel no compunctions. Henry's ghost—supposing it to be initiated and omniscient—would not be able to accuse her of lack of conjugal loyalty. On the contrary, she could conscientiously claim that any influence which she had been able to exert on Oliver Randall had been solely in her dead husband's behalf. Up to the last moment she had been intent on making Henry senator and it was for this purpose only that she had endeavored to find out if she possessed any power over her former lover.

Inasmuch as he had professed to love her once, it had been diverting to test her influence over him when the occasion offered after her happy marriage. If Sybil's conduct at the critical moment ordinarily merited the aphorism: "The flighty purpose never is o'ertook unless the deed go with it," she was fully capable of preening herself in the sunlight of subsequent enlightenment. Whatever the argument by which she had glossed over Oliver's share in their previous escapade in order to secure peace of mind as a married woman, and however innocent she had deemed herself of deliberate intent to accomplish her later purpose, now that the incentives which kept her from exact scrutiny were removed, her retrospect was free from illusion.

What Oliver's attitude toward her had once been required no interpretation. He had been crazy over her, and she to save appearances had married Henry. The thought which interested and baffled her was the hypothesis—supposing he had persevered and asked her to sacrifice all on the altar of passion by running away with him, what would have been her answer? She had never been obliged to decide because he had never given

her the chance. She had put him off and he had let her go and ever since had treated her refuge as sanctuary. How different from a foreigner, assuming that he really cared, and just then this American husband seemed to care. But it had ended there. All the advances such as they were since then had come from her. The limit of his subsequent indiscretion had been to send her flowers when her baby died. Viewed from this distance, there had clearly been the semblance of a grand passion in what they felt for one another, which with a little fanning would have swept her off her feet, and he had stamped on it. Looking back, was she not a victim? It had been the chance of her life to feel what every woman craves and he had let her exchange living for comfort without an effort to reclaim her.

And why? From sheer morality? Sheer morality would not have restrained him on the evening when his wife detected them. She had given him back to Mary. That was made plain at the time, and Mary had shut the door of forgiveness in his face and kept it locked ever since. She had not meant to steal him away, and she had been ready to pay the price of her indiscretion—had thrown herself in fact into the arms of another to smooth the way to reconciliation. Apparently he still hankered for the apple which he could not have—merely because he could not get it. Clutched by contrition, he was eating his heart out in the belief that he still loved this new woman who would not relent. Mary was the ideal of his penitence, the lodestar of his desire to prove that he had been only transiently unfaithful. Because of this he walked in the shadow, at heart a lonely, disconsolate, self-accusing man—an anomaly among husbands in any land except the United States.

Diverted by her reverie, Sybil stretched herself as one

emerging from lethargy. The past was the past, and though she had felt no interest in the present until now, she reached out toward it for nourishment like a sea-anemone putting forth its tentacles. One in her position must do something, become engrossed in something or existence would be unendurable. Henry, generous soul, had left her all his goods and chattels in order that she should make the most of them after she had ceased to be miserable. Taking account of her possessions for the first time, she realized that her establishment was luxuriously appointed, that she had the means to gratify every wish however extravagant, and that she had no uncongenial responsibilities. Experience had made of her a consummate woman of the world, and an apprenticeship at politics had developed a taste for large affairs which might lead to something when her period of bereavement was over. For the moment she could do very little, because of her mourning, but it behooved her to bide her time.

Instinctively she glanced down at her *crêpe* gown with its dainty widow's wristbands, then at the large mirror in her direct line of vision. Some women were better looking at forty than ever before, and she happened to be one of them—so she confessed in completion of her appraisal, and as she gazed the door-bell sounded. Presumably Oliver Randall; the clock said five. Too pitiful that he should be playing the contrite, expiating knight all to no purpose. Why should not some one tell him that Mary would never relent? Why not she herself, who understood them both? He had been so considerate that she almost owed him the service. She had always believed that he and Mary would come together in the end; but when Mary was proof against even the governorship, it was evident she must be obdurate.

Perhaps she would tell him if she got the chance. At least it would help to take her out of herself; be a step toward a normal outlook. Glancing once more at the mirror to make sure nothing was awry, Sybil remembered she was wearing mourning the first time they met. He seemed so radiantly happy then, poor Oliver, and in those days she herself was such a mouse and so inarticulate. What an anomaly that a prosperous, brilliant, whole-souled man, with a world full of women to choose from, should be chasing a domestic phantom. The American man was queer—sometimes. Conscious of impatience at his failure to try the effect of reprisals, Sybil turned at the sound of his footsteps.

"It's very good of you to come. More papers to sign I see."

"I hoped you might consent to be enlightened concerning your affairs, so I've drawn off this summary. Read these at your leisure," he replied and handed her a packet.

"I will. It happens that I woke this morning thinking it was time I made the effort. But first I wished to tell you, Oliver, how grateful I am for all your kindness. I've been so listless I've never even felt like mentioning it before; I was only half aware I had noticed it until the longing seized me to tell you that you have been a perfect dear. That shows I'm better, doesn't it? I am able to think of something besides myself."

The ceremony of bringing in the tea-things broke in upon this tribute. But Sybil chose to dwell upon it when they were alone again. "No woman could have been more thoughtful—if that's a satisfaction in this golden age of women."

"I was the one your husband selected to be serviceable," he answered simply.

"Oh, yes, I know you couldn't help it; besides we

were old friends. But you must let me have my way. Just think, I've been so self-absorbed, I've never once inquired how the investigation was going. You had all that on your mind, yet no one would have guessed it. I've been trying to read up a little to-day."

"There are no new vital developments—but it's plain the other side is very confident. There's much that requires explanation in the testimony thus far introduced, and it's whispered in the corridors that the proofs of wholesale knavery are in some one's safe and will be forthcoming at the proper moment. Meanwhile the obstacles which our friends put in the way—frequent adjournments, captious wrangling over evidence and the like, do not help the party with the public."

"It's too bad. And cruelly hard on you."

"The fortune of war. If they show even one-half of what they profess to have up their sleeves, it means of course that I'm a yearling."

"And otherwise you would be senator." The words slipped out in aid of her poignant regret that he was thus handicapped. Yet at the beginning of the session, only the other day as it were, she had secretly rejoiced in the investigation as a stepping-stone to her husband's ambition. She had cherished Oliver's instinct that it would be pusillanimous to resign while under fire and prevailed on Henry to reach for the splendid prize.

"Perhaps. But that was settled three months ago."

"It isn't settled until the vacancy is filled. Is there nothing I could do, Oliver? No wires I could pull? To exert myself is just what I need. And really, I'm fairly useful you know."

Her eagerness was so infectious that Oliver hesitated and colored, seemingly half amused, half touched.

"There are few who can give you points as a politician I'm very well aware. You forget you learned the rudiments from me. But even if there were anything to do, it isn't in your line. The man who has the power to produce the proofs of our disgrace is said to be no other than my old antagonist, now grown gray in the service, Steve Bartlett. He's a misogynist if there ever was one, and a tight-mouthed hard hitter into the bargain."

"There must be some one who could reach him," she said soliloquizingly. Her remark caused Oliver to start. "I forbid you to try. My individual record is entirely clean in this affair, and I don't intend to sully it."

The voice of authority, how it became him. Clear-eyed and resolute, he was looking her straight in the face as if to search her soul and circumvent any wiles she might be meditating. Instinctively she donned that air of docile helplessness ever at her disposal, which seemed to declare "intellectually I'm only a fool, but I would do anything to assist you in this crisis." It led him to relent and to explain for her benefit. "I never thought well of Fosdick"—(Fosdick was the chairman of the commission which built the capitol)—"I always suspected him of being in politics for what he could make out of them. If it's true that he has lined his pockets with the money of the taxpayers, he ought to be convicted, and we who are sailing on the same ship can't hope to save her from sinking. The innocent as well as the guilty will have to swim for their political lives, and those who reach the shore are likely to find themselves marooned on a desert island. That doesn't mean I'm not very grateful to you, Sybil, for your willingness to help. The same pros and cons exist, however, as before Henry died." He paused an instant then added: "My mind is full of something

very different at the moment, and you'll be interested. Christabel's engaged."

"Oh, Oliver, to whom?"

"A young man by the name of Rivers, in the railroad business and very capable—so his employers tell me. They've known each other a year or so it seems. Christabel brought him to see me and they're planning to marry as soon as possible. He has his salary, and I've offered to help them. I've far more money than I need; I told her so."

"Dear child!—I've virtually lost sight of her, alas! Is she as pretty as she promised, Oliver?"

"A charming-looking girl and very sweet—at least I think so. Tall, with dark eyes and quantities of lovely auburn hair. She dresses most becomingly; and is spirited, too. Yet quite unlike her mother in looks and temperament, and naturally this has been somewhat of a disappointment to Mary." His tone was pensive and half apologetic. "I'm not surprised that any man should fall in love with her."

"And Mary—doesn't she approve of the engagement?" asked Sybil, breaking the pause which followed the paternal tribute.

"She deploras it; and has done everything she could to counteract what she regards as mere infatuation, which would wear off if Chris would only wait. But it's too late—or was inevitable, from the start apparently. Chris has set her heart on being married and very soon—in spite of being what her mother calls a mere child. She's perfectly decided and Mary finally has yielded. She won't oppose the match longer, but obviously the prematurity—that's the substance of the objection according to Chris—is grating on her terribly." He waited an instant, then went on: "I'm sorry for her; I can understand exactly.⁴ She expected great things of Chris-

tabel, hoped she would be a leader like herself; so it must be a blow to have her infatuated with this young Rivers and simply bent on being dotingly domestic."

The reappearance of the butler on the scene enabled Sybil to muse for a moment on this strange mixture of fatherly pride and conjugal concern. "*It is hard on Mary, isn't it?* She likes to believe that by another generation the girls who succumb to the first young man on the old abject terms—will be pitiful exceptions. To tell the truth, I'm rather disappointed in Chris myself. For her own sake I mean; because she's likely to appear far more behind the times than I long before she reaches the same age. Before we know it, she will be having babies and nursing them herself, and thinking fatuously that there is no one on the earth quite the equal of her—commonplace husband."

As it dawned upon Oliver that Sybil was disparaging Mary, he flushed uneasily. He realized that his companion had ceased to be the disconsolate widow whose loneliness he had come to alleviate and was again the accomplished woman of the world, compact of graces. Set in the frame of her exquisite surroundings, she had, chameleonlike, taken on an aspect of initiative which imparted even to the lines of her dull mourning an arresting charm. And even more; for as he looked and met her gaze, where mockery seemed contending with something that might be either wrath or pity, he saw once more the Sybil of the election returns and the chafing-dish, a little older but beautiful and even more luscious than ever. Her former sympathetic, ingratiating self, yet bolder too, as if to say: "Why shouldn't I disclose all I feel?"

This was her method of letting him know she was sorry for him. So Oliver reflected and simultaneously he sought to avoid any complicity in deriding Mary by

the plain statement of fact essential to round out his earlier announcement.

"It is settled that Chris is to be married in a month and very privately," he said.

Sybil's eyes seemed to mock again, and he had a confused sense of having revealed in terms what he had hoped to conceal—the repugnance of the governor's daughter to a public wedding because of the deplorable breach between her parents. And then he heard her ask: "Have you ever considered a divorce, Oliver?"

The words were softly spoken, but with distinctness. He quailed before the explicit question. Yes, she was bolder; so bold indeed that she ventured to use a probe. "What do you mean?" he asked after a measurable silence. Yet her eyes disarmed him, for the yearning pity in them was unmistakable.

"Isn't your patience exhausted yet?"

"With Mary?" he asked simply, as one who hopes he is mistaken.

"She will never go back to you. That must be clear by this time."

He threw up his head as of old, challenging her positiveness. "And even so, do I deserve she should?" A note of solicitude betrayed that the query was inspired by the desire to exonerate his wife no less than by self-reproach.

"Oh, Oliver, haven't you discovered yet that she treated you abominably? I told her that night it was all her fault."

The words escaped as if they had been in leash waiting for this moment. Plainly her version in aid of the remedy she had sprung upon him—so he excused the liberty which tore aside the curtain drawn for years, and in the same breath he protested: "How could you, when she saw with her own eyes what I—what we—?"

Her fault? She must have thought you out of your mind, Sybil, or—or brutal.” He paused a moment as if expecting that she would recall her words. “No, it was all my fault. I lost my head.” Then, as compunction wrote itself in anguish on his brow, he added tragically: “But after all it was an accident.”

Such was his comfort. Should she begrudge it to him? It was so true, and yet so naïve. With eyes narrowed to slits, Sybil smiled to herself and answered: “We both of us knew that.”

“You proved it so by marrying at once. Whatever was between us, ended at that moment. I’ve asked myself a thousand times how it ever happened.”

“It had to happen; there was no escape. Yet, as you say, it ended then and there and so we can discuss it frankly now. I was constantly at home and Mary wasn’t. You got accustomed to me unwittingly, while Mary nursed a theory—that you would never look twice at any woman in the world except herself.”

“Oh yes,” he groaned, “she trusted me completely, and that’s why she finds it so impossible to forgive.”

“Instead of being grateful; when the wonder is the upshot was all smoke instead of fire. It might not have been, you know, and with youth and opportunity as accomplices, wild horses wouldn’t have kept us apart, marriage or no marriage. Such things go on even in Benham. You thought for a moment you were in love with me, though I wasn’t really at all your sort. And there’s where Mary was so lucky. She ought to have thanked God and sent for you after what I told her instead of ruining your happiness and hers.”

Oliver had listened, rueful yet spellbound. Sybil’s reincarnation of the past under the chaperonage of what might have been confused him to the point of confession. “I was completely infatuated with you at

the time—was ready for anything. It was your sense that saved us.” He paused a moment. “What did you tell Mary?”

“Pointed out the narrowness of her escape and endeavored to make her understand that what she had overheard was—an accident, and that you really cared for her as much as ever. Naturally she was in the mood at the moment not to wish you back on any footing and to profess indifference whether the worst was true or not. Then we both got angry, and because I knew she was more to blame than either of us, I pitched into her and gave her my reasons. I told her that a man needs watching under all circumstances—watching and petting also—and she had brought the trouble on herself by believing she had demonstrated the contrary. And she so clear-headed and practical. But she expected too much of us, Oliver. She really did.”

The dispassionateness of this deduction was so contagious that he merely parried her thrust.

“You were very useful to her.”

“And she permitted me to be useful to you.”

“Because she supposed she could rely on me to be absolutely faithful.”

“But it takes three to make such a bargain. You meant to be, Oliver. Perhaps I was to blame—a little bit.” Involuntarily she dropped her eyes to attest her penitence. “Mary would tell you it was mostly I.”

“Preposterous,” he faltered. “Why, it was you who saved us.”

“Saved you? I wonder; I meant to—yes I meant to. But looking back, I’ve brought you precious little happiness by my good intentions. That’s why I spoke of the divorce, Oliver. At present you’re living only half a life, and that’s not fair.”

“Fair?” he echoed.

"You've paid the full penalty. For your own happiness you oughtn't to let Mary discard you and keep you into the bargain."

"But you don't see her side, Sybil. I shattered her ideal—I who joined hands in a troth that was to lift us above the plane of every day marriage. Mutual equality and mutual forbearance—those were our tokens. We seemed so happy at first, and even after you came I didn't dream that it was otherwise. But let's leave you out. What was wrong dates back to the very beginning. And let's admit besides that what you charge is true—that she brought what happened on herself by neglecting me. It isn't a new idea. I've had many bitter moments, I have them still—while thrashing this out. The worst you can say of her is this: In the course of winning a national reputation she made me comfortable by proxy and took my political ambitions too lightly. But after all, she was really on the defensive—battling for her rights from the day we married. She found me out—subconsciously I mean—and recognized I was an impostor."

Sybil looked puzzled. "Her rights? How can you think so? Why, you gave her her own way in everything," she could not refrain from murmuring.

"Oh yes, on the surface. But I never took her aspirations seriously. I condescended from the first, although I had wooed her with lip service that branded bullying as obsolete. At heart I wanted her to be the old-fashioned idolizing wife whose opinions were sound because they reiterated mine and whose talents were playthings to keep her entertained. I was so self-absorbed that I still thought of Mary as an amateur when she had become a celebrity. And so to save herself from being bullied, she retaliated—paid me back in my own coin. Two wrongs don't make a right; but if I could only get the chance to tell her that I was the one who

began it, she might be willing to make a fresh start." The tears stood in his eyes. "You think I'm morbid. Very likely. Sometimes I'm ready to rebel and say she has treated me unfairly. But it was a noble experiment, and it was her conception. Between us, if you like, we've managed to shatter the music-box which played our melody, and that leaves me groping."

"And you would still go back to her in spite of everything."

Once more Sybil's intonation reflected the impassivity of fate, voicing an announcement rather than a question. Yet Oliver looked troubled as though he were facing the decision for the first time and saw lions in the path. "To begin again under the cover of experience suggests a warmed-over dinner. But I long to try. You know I adored Mary—and what she really stands for."

"So did I. I always told you she was worth six of me." And after a moment Sybil added pensively—"I wonder if the world will ever be as she imagines—that men won't bully women; or, as you put it, condescend to them."

"Why not? If men don't——"

"It isn't the men," she interrupted, "but ourselves, Oliver, whom the new feminism has to alter over. For every one who hates it, won't there always be a dozen women longing for men to bully them? Most women wouldn't be really happy otherwise—for like mine their brains are only so so." Oliver laughed, but she shook her head. "I'm just as serious as you are. I for one should hate not being bullied. I should expect to become as selfish as a man, and this would make me utterly miserable. I don't make an exception even of you, Oliver. You've just admitted that you're like the rest. Only——"

She broke off, hesitating. "What was it you were going to say?" he asked.

"Won't it come down in the end just as it always has to this—what sort of woman does a man like best? To-day we all think we pick and choose our husbands, but when we begin to prescribe the type of woman a man ought to fall in love with and which he must accept or go without, some artful hussy is sure to cut under; and so in self-defense we give him what he wants and he is none the wiser for what he has lost. Mary is for standing out. It remains to be seen whether in the long run the Marys can survive the competition. It's in every woman's mouth that the men must change. They would perhaps if we set them the example. But we seem to be made like that—bent on pleasing. And so it's terribly discouraging."

"For Mary?" he asked tentatively in answer to her pause.

"No, for me—and the rank and file of us, Oliver. You know I've always aspired to be like Mary and couldn't."

"She is merely ahead of her time, and the rest will follow," he said as in soliloquy. "It was I who fell short of what she had a right to require."

"No, she was only abreast of it. I used to think she was ahead; but hers—and yours—is a real modern attempt at something better than the old sort of thing. It chances to be enacted here in Benham, but it might have happened with a change of setting in any other portion of the civilized globe—London—Paris—Oshkosh. Every woman who is worth her salt is prospecting in that direction and those of us who are not—like me—are watching to see whether the men really like the new method. If they do, we shall have to conform as well as we can—that's all. If they don't—marriage will

scarcely stop. You see, it isn't settled yet even in your individual case."

"Settled?" he echoed. He gazed at her inquiringly, and his senses swam. It sounded cryptic, as if she were offering him a choice and he were free to elect; the sentence which she had uttered a moment before—what sort of woman does a man like best?—formulated itself in his brain, and then for the first time he remembered that she was free.

"If you go on waiting, it means that she's the kind you prefer—even at arm's length. Otherwise there's the way I pointed out to you. If I were a man——"

Her frankness halted there, leaving unsaid what she would do in such a case, and Oliver refrained from inquiry. The Delphic quality in her speech, beyond the insinuation that only a fool would let matters remain as they were, served as a danger-signal; he rose bewilderingly conscious of thinking: "Why shouldn't I be satisfied with this? Why shouldn't I stay here forever?" and that if he did not instantly depart there was no knowing what he might not say or do. There she stood even more entrancing than seven years before, and his perhaps for the asking. A fool indeed to have been so slow in comprehending what she, whether designedly or no, had made so clear. Her words had said only too plainly: "Why eat your heart out longer when you might find consolation elsewhere?" And up to this moment he had been inordinately blind. A divorce! Was the possibility of their marriage in Sybil's thoughts, or was she merely eager for his happiness?

The vitality of these emotions warned him that it was time to go; for a moment he was tempted to betray himself, but her mourning forbade. When he reached the street he did not know whether to be glad

or sorry that he had exercised self-restraint. His nerves were all on fire; her image still invoked him. She was sympathetic, charming, rich, and tactful; and unquestionably she liked him. They could be excellent comrades and his interests would be her first concern. All on the hypothesis that Mary should continue obdurate; and Sybil had just told him that she would—predicted that his case was hopeless. The impatient thought seized him that he must ascertain once and for all whether this was so. Sybil was right—matters could not continue as they were. And with this state of mind came the consciousness that he was facing for a second time in his life, but from a different angle, the harassing inquiry—which of them did he prefer? Did he wish to live again with Mary, assuming that she would return, or would he be happier by sundering the tie and marrying Sybil? What had been only a mad impulse, the riot of his physical senses—so he had labelled in his hours of contrition, the episode which had wrecked his life, believing it a vagary—was whispering calmly in his ear and obliging him to listen. “If they were standing side by side and you were free to choose, which would it be?” The phantasmagoria recalled a mechanism familiar to his youth, the toy-house from which tiny human figures impersonating fair and foul weather popped out alternately, or appeared together hovering in equilibrium. It was in the latter posture that he saw them now, each peeping forth as if to say: “We’re real, but you can’t have us both; so one of us must vanish.”

Instinctively Oliver quickened his steps, impatient to reach home and think matters over. By the time he had arrived he had evolved a course born of his predicament. The thought of a divorce had occurred to

him from time to time, but he had invariably put it away. If Mary desired her freedom, well and good; it was for her to make the suggestion, not for him, the offender. And he had clung to the hope that she might finally relent. Grant that she had put opportunity in his way and shown herself implacable, he was the one chiefly at fault, and as such must pay the penalty of his lapse—how often he had followed out the familiar argument to the same conclusion. If the punishment meted out to him for having broken the spirit if not the letter of the compact subscribed by him as an American husband was to lead the life of a lonely anchorite, it was for him to live up to the terms of his sentence and endure. It was the only way left to him to show contrition—the sort of penitence which might convince his wife of his sincerity.

This mental attitude had been his safeguard through the intervening years against random temptation. All his spiritual energies had been concentrated on proving his offense to be in truth the result of aberration—an accident which could not recur. Far from harboring the philosophy which invited him to seek consolation elsewhere, he had rejoiced in the belief that he was not merely proof against fresh lures, but cured completely of the infatuation which had exiled him from home. Sybil, having repulsed him as a virtuous woman should and married, had taken on a new aspect, and his tempera-
ture had fallen, not merely from shame at his own weakness, but because she had placed herself beyond his reach. By becoming his friend's wife she had announced that all was over between them, and up to the moment when they met at her ball he had to all intents respected the obligation thus imposed on him. Gazing at her on that occasion amid her new surroundings, his

predominant emotion had been curiosity, and while they conversed, it was as though he were making the acquaintance of some one else—a brilliant, composed woman of the world in place of the artless young person who had bewitched him without meaning to, and transformed him into an animal.

The renewal of their intimacy had worn the sanction of a political partnership, the terms of which were thinly veiled; she and her husband were to work for him assiduously and in due course he was to reward them by preferment. The disinterestedness of Henry Thornton's loyalty he never questioned while his own star was in the ascendant, but he had discerned that under the cover of ostensible hero-worship Sybil was biding her time. He saw her constantly—for she was freely admitted to their councils—and he was not blind to her ripe adult charms, but in this period when his eyes were averted from all women and he was seeking to deaden sensibility by engrossment in public life, her blandishments were not mistaken for coquetry. He realized that she was practising on him to help Henry and so transparently as to suggest that she expected him to see through and approve of her conjugal artifice. Nor when the hour for payment arrived, had she been left in the attitude of overreaching. Acceptance of the senatorship was so incompatible with a nice code of honor, that no true friend could do other than agree with him; and with this settled, she had been free to command his influence in her husband's favor.

Oliver re-entered his house understanding that he had reached a fresh crisis in his life. To go on sighing for one woman and hanker for another or to be amorous of one woman, yet be tied to another, was an intolerable situation to his direct mind. Never had his surround-

ings appeared so comfortless. The home which he had preserved intact ever since his wife's departure, in the hope that she would some day return, seemed to him dingy and uninviting. He had sometimes imagined that nothing was altered, but to-night the rooms proclaimed: "No one lives here except a bachelor—as any one would guess."

The only tolerable spot seemed the "den" in which he shut himself up after a lonely dinner to wrestle with his quandary. Beyond its threshold the tenants were all ghosts. Here was where he had actually lived and waited penitent for more than seven years—a married man who was nevertheless a bachelor. He had endured unflinchingly and in good faith, turning a deaf ear to the murmurs which had not failed to reach him—"Why don't you end it? There are other fish in the sea." Such the comment once of good old Everett Dean emboldened in the end to speak his mind. Oliver had no doubt that most of his men friends were laughing in their sleeves. He, the governor of the State, who might presumably pick and choose, eating his heart out. He had divined that even Ham was sorry for him and out of patience with Mary.

He was just a commonplace man—no better and no worse than the average—except for his oratorical gifts and his persistence. He had waited all these years and resisted temptation. Now that he was determined to end the matter one way or the other, the reasons were clear; he had stated some of them that afternoon and they were deeply genuine. Mary had been his ideal of womanhood. She had made two requirements of him, sexual fidelity and that he should treat her as a mental equal. He had failed in both respects deplorably; and his realization of the less obvious guilt had only dawned

upon him by degrees since she had left him. These were the two virtues which the husband of the future must certainly possess or conventional matrimony could not last. Both obligations were a part of the marriage compact which he had knowingly signed.

His wife and he had sought to pave the way for other couples, and the experiment having broken down mainly through his fault, she still utterly refused to forgive him. These were the dismal, admitted facts. An experiment, but also a piece of real life—his life with the alternatives confronting him of continued heart-hunger or a chance of happiness—at least an anodyne. The same voice which urged that Mary had brought their catastrophe upon herself was softly saying: "I'm the real woman, ancient and unalterable as the hills; requiring nothing except the privilege of making you happy and finding my own happiness in doing so. You've tried the other kind. Try me."

The insinuation stabbed Oliver to the heart even at the moment that he beheld Sybil beckoning from his lonely threshold, a self-revealed enchantress. He could have her for the asking and she had meant him to understand so. Her smile said unequivocally: "I am Alpha and Omega, Eve and Penelope and Cleopatra; nothing else is woman." Were his dreams of a nobler sex unity mere delusion? Would women never rise above that lower level because they held men better by remaining as they were? Which variety did he himself prefer in his heart at this moment? God help him, he did not know. If Mary would not live with him, Sybil offered him a haven—comfort, alluring charms, and idolizing companionship; he would reach for and take them. But the other question—until he put the crucial inquiry he was not free to decide. Even to dally with the beckoning rival would be treason until he knew exactly where

he stood. Of this he was positive, there must be no more delay.

Presently he opened his portfolio and amid the stillness wrote as follows:

DEAREST MARY,

It is imperative that I see you immediately. Our relations cannot continue as at present. I must have either you or my liberty. In order to talk this over, I shall call to see you sometime to-morrow afternoon and trust to find you at home.

He paused a moment at this point hesitant and then he added,

Your loving and contrite husband,

OLIVER.

CHAPTER XXVIII

It was one of those refreshing days in early September that follow a protracted spell of heat; when the face of Nature, which yesterday looked parched and lifeless, sparkles with energy, and the dweller in cities, as he inhales deep drafts of the tonic atmosphere, kindles with new visions and hopes.

It had been an exhausting summer even for Benham, which unvisited by the breezes of either the ocean or the Great Lakes, is accustomed to swelter and to mop its brow uncomplainingly. But this year the thermometer had remained so continuously in the nineties that the pavements blistered the feet, and the winding Nye, which ordinarily affords the shadow if not the substance of relief, shrank to a sluggish thread of tepid water and every wind seemed torrid.

There had been more than the usual midsummer exodus in consequence, and for the first time in Benham's record it could literally be said that by the middle of July business initiative wholly ceased. No one was fit to think of anything except methods of trying to keep cool, and further consideration of public affairs, however urgent, was summarily put over until the autumn. The lethargy was so universal that even the legislative committee investigating the building contracts relative to the State capitol, which in deference to the keen popular interest in the proceedings had arranged to sit without intermission through the summer, capitulated to the weather and suspended its hearings until after Labor Day.

With the advent of September the heat had moderated slightly, but extreme discomfort prevailed until the drought was broken by a terrific thunder-storm, almost a tornado, during which the thirsty streets became rivulets, and the barometer of human hope rose as the temperature plunged headlong. The deluge lasted through the night and the dawn beheld a cleansed, invigorated, and already buoyant city which had almost forgotten its ordeal under the spur of the fresh northwest wind, the herald of autumn and new enterprises.

On this particular morning in the second week in September, Mary Arnold was among those whose step was elastic for the first time in many weeks. Leaving her apartment early, she was making a circuit with the ostensible purpose of inspecting some of her own landscape-gardening on the terraces of the new State capitol before reaching her office. It had been a depressing three months for diverse reasons, but now at last the terrific heat, which had kept her limp and incapable of effective thought, was over, and it was a physical pleasure once more to be alive. As she enjoyed the cool breeze, which at every step restored her vigor and swept the vapors from her brain, it seemed to her that Benham had never appeared to better advantage than when viewed through the crisp atmosphere of this radiant autumn morning.

Because of the detour, she had taken an electric car at the outset, getting off at a point that commanded the approach to the newly developed quarter of the city within the radius of which were most of the public buildings denoting Benham's recent growth. Here, where the Nye makes a broad sweep to the southwest until it runs almost at right angles with its former course and with the fashionable boulevard known as the River Drive, lay an ample tract until lately occupied by

farms, which civic ambition had appropriated for æsthetic purposes. Within a decade, through public spirit or the munificence of individuals, a score of fine public buildings had sprung from this territory in token of the ambitious city's yearnings; the Art Museum, the new Public Library, the Pierian Concert Hall, and several institutes and hospitals; and farthest in a westerly direction, yet verging nearer to the throbbing arteries of trade which converge upon it by wide avenues, stood the new capitol with its expansive marble wings and ambitious cupola.

Far to the north, four miles as the crow flies and across the northerly bend of the river, was the manufacturing section with its grimy industries; a compact seething city of shops and dwelling-houses lay between; but in this region was peace and spaciousness. The architectural effect was individual rather than homogeneous, "a go as you please" contest, in which native talent, given its glowing opportunity to create a masterpiece, had sometimes strained at genius to the disregard of unity. And yet a prevailing note was detected in the tendency to adapt the glories of the mediæval renaissance to modern utility with sprightly concessions to Bernini.

As she proceeded through this parklike area consecrated to noble edifices, Mary's heart swelled with civic pride. Both her artistic and her moral sensibilities were stirred by the stately outlines, splendid vistas, and unequivocal aspirations revealed. It seemed a far remove from the turreted feudal castle erected as a residence by Joel Flagg, Benham's first magnate, built before she was born, to the new landmarks of this impressive neighborhood. One had only to glance at the Silas K. Parsons hospital for women, considered a wonder in its day, or observe how the proportions of Wet-

more College, which from its site on the opposite bank of the river used to dominate the landscape, had dwindled and lost quality, in order to realize the rapid progress in taste. It was inspiring too that this development had taken place during her own life and was cognate to her own growth. Not only had she been in her humble way a contributor to it, but she could perceive that these several creations along her route, however faulty, were not imitative but so many attempts to symbolize a new and vital philosophy. The time was surely coming when this conception of reorganized human society would be so adequately expressed in imperishable marble and bronze that customs which now passed current as civilized would appear archaic as the social code of the Egyptians.

The atmosphere had also worked a change overnight in Mary's attitude toward her own personal problems. She had been sick at heart and very listless because of the conjunction of events as to the sequel of which she seemed powerless—Sybil Thornton's widowhood, the more overt menace of political disaster for Oliver, and in the wake of these Christabel's unpalatable engagement. In spite of its imminence, the last had been a shock and bitter blow. Her daughter's abdication of a career in order to marry at the mere behest of the mating instinct was too disappointing not to arouse both remonstrance and opposition. For the moment the episode had overshadowed every other care. Yet argument had proved unavailing. Christabel remained adamant in her purpose to marry Francis Rivers almost immediately, and it seemed enough for her that his salary had been raised, that they were prepared to live on very little, and that her father had agreed to help her.

Christabel had made clear from the start that her father had not abetted her disloyalty, explaining that

his first inquiry had been: "What does your mother say to this?" and that only after she declared she would not give up her lover, had there been any hint of an allowance. Mary had exonerated Oliver from complicity. Seeing that the boy and girl professed to be in love and the ways and means were provided, it was not to be expected that he would fathom the depth of her disapproval. The case was hopeless, this had been apparent for some time—but up to the present she had withheld her consent, though painfully aware that Christabel would marry without it.

What rankled was not the disobedience, but the atavistic streak which had caused her only daughter to lose sight of everything but the desire to settle down with this respectable but commonplace young man and bear babies for him. Christabel's infatuation was not couched in those bald terms of course—the deluded child mistook the motive—but her daily demeanor and tastes revealed only too plainly that she was a flagrant instance of reversion. She cared inordinately for dress, was very susceptible to petting and flattery; she leaned on others for her opinions except when excited, and then she spoke from prejudice; she doted on housework and perpetually plied her needle instead of using her mind; and (save on a special occasion involving her relations to some man) she lacked initiative and was content to be just meek, tender, lovable, and ornamental. She was adorable in her own way (so Francis Rivers had decided and no wonder), but she embodied the collective traits from which the modern woman had emancipated herself.

During the month which had elapsed since the announcement to her of this folly, Mary had dwelt relentlessly on the paradox. She resolved not to sanction the match and that Christabel should wait until she was

mature; then on realizing that the child was determined to have her way, she had sought in vain to discover why she should have given birth to such a daughter. Happily there was no lack of affection on either side; yet the incongruousness of the contrast between them remained a trial. But this morning she realized the futility of further opposition. By compelling Christabel to wed without her consent she might hopelessly estrange the child who, despite all shortcomings, was her dearest possession. Because she would never feel reconciled to the match, it did not follow that she must refuse to forgive it. Having arrived at this conclusion, Mary endeavored to ameliorate the outlook. She reflected that it was not impossible the marriage would turn out better than she feared. Christabel was not unlikely to develop more positive characteristics as she grew older, and there was always the chance that Mr. Rivers would prove a second Ham in his conjugal attitude. After all, she must not let her own domestic misfortunes blind her to the probability that men of that type were on the increase.

While Mary indulged in this more hopeful vein, a bend in the road she was following brought her in full sight of the new capitol, glimpses of which she had already obtained during her progress. She had reached the intersection of a broad avenue that led straight toward Benham's latest architectural triumph, less than a quarter of a mile away. Save for minor details and the embellishment of the grounds, it was finished—a vast, stately structure, florid, yet sumptuous, individual and inspiring with its Corinthian columns and expansive wings that glistened snowy-white against the autumn sky. So Mary enjoyed the spectacle; but her thrill of admiration was quickly followed by the reminder that the legislative committee on whose investigations Oliver's

fate depended had reassembled and was presumably in session.

The remembrance sobered her ecstasy, though in fact she had been aware when she left home that such was the case. Indeed her errand regarding the terraces had played into the hands of an indefinite desire which had possessed her that morning to be near the scene of action. When she awoke she had been conscious of a longing to help Oliver, the only ostensible outlet for which seemed to be a visit to the capitol. She reasoned that she might possibly obtain admission to the hearing and that while there some expedient might occur to her. Anything was preferable to the supine condition in which she had dragged along all summer. Though she despaired of influencing the result, she had set out under the spur of the incentive that whatever she hoped to accomplish must be done at once.

How pitiful, she reflected, that the majesty of the splendid edifice should already be sullied by the shadow of chicanery! It was meet that the thieves who had plundered the public treasury should be pilloried, and apparently inevitable also that the guilty should not be the only scapegoats. Mary sighed as she thus subscribed to fate, then she temporarily forgot her solicitude in studying the details of the environment which she was now near enough to inspect. The paths and terraces were still incomplete, but several statues of military and civic worthies were already in position, and she paused at a proper distance to study these before visiting the work which she had come to criticise. All men, not even a goddess—so she commented, and she surmised hopefully that there would be less corruption when women had a larger voice in politics. Again she sighed, not from lack of conviction, but because the prospect of the opportunity to prove it became suddenly remote, as

she tried to picture a swarm of feminine legislators with a woman governor at the head.

While thus preoccupied and indifferent to the passers, of whom there were several on their way to and from the capitol, Mary, turning in response to a voice that uttered her name with surprise, found herself face to face with Mr. Bartlett. Though he was the most likely man of her acquaintance outside the governor whom she might have expected to encounter, her astonishment rivalled his own. Reflecting that surely now he would put two and two together and conjecture her identity, if he were still ignorant of it, she hastened to answer his friendly invitation to account for her presence, by saying:

"I've transferred temporarily my workshop here, you know. I have to spend a portion of my time in making certain that the workmen carry out——"

"To be sure, to be sure. For the moment I had forgotten. We politicians are too apt to labor under the delusion that the sun rises and sets solely for our special benefit. You've a commission here of course. And whereabouts?" he asked with a sweeping glance that took in the environment and led him to remark: "Looks pretty stunning, doesn't it? When everything is fixed up and the shrubs begin to grow, Benham can afford to issue invitations."

"Yes, indeed. I've been revelling in the general effect as I came along. The little bit that they've been good enough to intrust to me isn't far from here, but it's in the half-developed stage and you would have to retrace your steps." But the desire to hold him firmly to this scent caused her to add: "Can you spare a few moments?"

"As many as you like. I came here expecting to spend the entire morning yonder"—and he nodded at

the capitol—but it has turned out a fruitless errand. They don't want me and so——”

His debonair smile supplied the ellipsis, and taking him at his word, Mary proceeded to lead the way. While he asked how she had stood the heat and they exchanged salutations on the exhilarating change in the atmosphere, she was reflecting that no one meeting him casually would ever suppose that this rather nondescript and grizzled little man was a power in the land. She had merely to mention her desire to attend the hearing and all doors would unquestionably fly open. For all she knew, his errand might relate to the investigation. It was more than probable that such was the case.

“I didn't suppose there was much going on at the capitol at this season of the year,” she ventured to remark. “I should think the heat would have driven every one away.”

“So it did. The recess-committee which is probing into the reasons why this palatial structure, handsome as it is, cost such a mint of money, fled the city for six weeks; but met again three days ago only to be informed this morning that two of the members are indisposed—Senator Griggs and Assemblyman Porter. This necessitates a further postponement. That's why I've so much time on my hands. I was the next witness.”

“You came here all for nothing, then. How provoking!”

“That's a small matter, especially in view of this pleasant recompense. Besides it was one of the dodges to be expected. Their case is desperate and they're wriggling. But they can't escape. This time we've got them tighter than in a vise.” He spoke with the quiet complacency of one who knows.

“Really?”

Mary's interrogation, meant to lure him on, must

have sounded a little rueful, for Mr. Bartlett responded: "I remember now, you think it's hard on the governor. Well, so it is; I agreed with you in that when we compared notes last spring. I'm sorry for him too. It's a case, I fear, of evil associates; in politics, Mrs. Arnold, they often prove as disastrous as actual guilt."

"I see," she murmured. "And this adjournment—when will you be called again to testify?"

"The hearing was put over nominally for a week; by that time the two patriots may or may not have recovered. Every one understands that it was merely a ruse to postpone the evil day in the hope that something will turn up. It goes without saying they'd throw overboard the grafters if that would save the party. They've tried everything, including buying us out; I don't say Randall, but the organization; and now they're talking of a deal. 'Suppress the bottom facts and give us the senatorship and we'll make restitution and let you have the State offices this fall,'—that's what was being whispered this morning in the corridors. But it won't work. Even if we were willing, we couldn't afford to hoodwink the people; they know too much already. Other things being equal, I'd like to see Oliver Randall senator, as I've told you before; and I'd stretch a point to please you, Mrs. Arnold, but this case is a snap. We've merely to show our hand to sweep the entire board. I seem to be letting out secrets, but they're merely facts which everybody will have to know before long."

It evidently entertained him to be prattling contrary to the practise of a lifetime with this intelligent and yet so unsophisticated disciple of the arts.

"Then it's useless, isn't it?" she asserted. "His friends can't possibly save him."

"Not unless they are magicians. The proofs are

overwhelming and unanswerable." Having said so much, her companion halted on the flagged pathway and after a cautious glance on either side to make sure that no one was eavesdropping, added: "I have them here." As he spoke he tapped his breast significantly and allowed the corner of a yellow envelope to emerge slightly from his pocket.

Mary's heart beat faster. His manner indicated plainly that he felt so ineffably safe in admitting her to his confidence that he was enjoying the joke. It was as though he were taking a day off in a double sense and amusing himself by an indiscretion. Out of the fulness of her surprise she exclaimed: "Oh, Mr. Bartlett, I'd no idea you were such an important witness."

For a moment he seemed to enjoy her astonishment at the glimpse which he had given her of his power, then his habitual prudence reasserted itself and he answered dryly:

"I happen merely to be the depository of certain papers."

His evident purpose to commit himself no further, if not to minimize what he had let fall was abetted by their arrival at Mary's terrace which was on one of the lateral approaches to the capitol. A small army of workmen was busy there, a few occupied in planting shrubs, the others in establishing a pedestal on which a colossal allegorical feminine figure was presently to stand. Mary regretted that the statue was not in place, for she would have liked Mr. Bartlett to see it. She regarded this as her most ambitious piece of sculpture. As a landscape-gardener she had also been given a free hand regarding the setting. For the moment she forgot all else in the interest of explaining what she hoped ultimately to accomplish. Mr. Bartlett showed himself a most appreciative listener, and during the ten minutes

while they were thus engaged the impression produced by what he had confided to her was suspended. The necessity that she should dally for some time longer in order to make sure that her instructions were carried out obliged her to decline his offer to carry her by automobile to the city, and not until she had seen the pedestal in position and she had turned her footsteps toward the city did she look the import of his disclosure fully in the face.

"That settles it, then. There's nothing I can do; that any one can do. His friends are powerless,"— so she summarized its significance. Clearly there was nothing to be gained by lingering in the vicinity or in cudgelling her brains to devise expedients. The existence of the incriminating documents and her knowledge that they could be produced at the proper moment had set the seal on Oliver's fate. Save for the dilatory tactics employed, the exposure would have appeared in the afternoon papers. Her disposition to laugh aloud at the irony which had made her the privileged recipient of the secret was checked by the lugubrious consciousness that the matter was settled. Well, as Mr. Bartlett had said, such were the melancholy yet logical consequences of keeping evil company. Nothing could avert the compromising scandal; and at the same time she was exempt from even the indirect reproach of having neglected to utilize any means to save him. It behooved her now to immerse herself in her own affairs.

Acting on this wise impulse, Mary turned to take a final view of the receding terrace, and pictured in her mind's eye the effect of her masterpiece when beheld from this distance. She had sought to impart to the features of the allegorical figure, half goddess, half human, a blending of loveliness, initiative, and spirited dignity which should symbolize the woman of the future—man's partner on equal terms and also his imagina-

tive, fearless rival. She had aimed to portray her as infinitely tender and deep in her affections, yet consistently self-respecting; no longer a mere slave or echo, yet profoundly sensible to the intensity of sex; an embodiment of spirit, yet lithe and brimming over with red-blooded energy that would gradually discredit by efficient reasonableness the demon force. The ideal must be human of course in order to be convincing; it was not sufficient that women ought to be just like that. The zeal of the reformer, colliding with the instinct of the artist, wavered for an instant and then triumphed. The truth of such a conception was essential to the betterment of the world. If women were to remain as they had been, civilization could never hope to advance. Surely, the creation was genuine for all who possessed the capacity to see, and expressed all that she had intended. It would prove to be her masterpiece she hoped.

Kindling with satisfaction as the result of this scrutiny, Mary turned to resume her progress toward town. She walked rapidly, impatient to reach her office, where numerous matters, now that she was completely free to attend to them, demanded her presence. The exalted features of her new statue still tenanted her brain; but suddenly, as she proceeded, they were metamorphosed into those of Sybil by the insidious speculation—has she been idle all this while? Concerning Sybil's whereabouts and doings she was completely unadvised. Presumably she had been at "Foxgrove" during the excessive heat. It was not unlikely, however, that notwithstanding her recent widowhood, she had been privy to the machinations in Oliver's behalf referred to by Mr. Bartlett. He had hinted at the use of money; she possessed a superabundance; might not the party fund be from her rich coffers?

Mary silenced the feverish conjecture by the reflection that whatever efforts had been put forth or whoever was their sponsor, they were certain to be unavailing. The comfort derived from this proved short-lived; for she found herself entertaining a succession of forbidding inquiries. What would be the sequel to Oliver's political downfall? Would he not be likely to seek out Sybil? He could not marry without obtaining a divorce; but assuming that he was in love with Sybil, and she should lavish sympathy on him, was the mere legal obstacle likely to separate them?

Mary tried to put away the unwelcome train of thought, the irrelevancy of which irritated her. Why should she concern herself with what they chose to do? It mattered not. So far as the legal barrier was concerned, she had offered Oliver his freedom on that fatal evening when she had surprised them together. If he desired a divorce, he was still welcome to it. The consideration which disturbed her was that her mind should be occupied with his future at the moment when she had supposed herself free of all responsibility toward him.

As the day went on Mary recovered her poise, and ascribed her lack of control over her thoughts to physical exhaustion from the heat. On the theory that there was nothing now to distract her from them, she immersed herself in her professional affairs. Both of the matters which had weighed on her were disposed of; Christabel was to be married immediately with her consent, and it had been demonstrated that she could not avert Nemesis from Oliver. When on three successive mornings she awoke feeling let down and restless instead of refreshed, she closed her mind to everything except work, on the assumption that the continued cool weather would soon restore her elasticity.

For a long time it had been Mary's wont during the early stage of creative work to avoid her office and isolate herself in her apartment. She fancied that she could design to better advantage there, and that she was freer from interruption. Having several important orders in hand which should be begun this autumn, and hoping to cure her listlessness by closer concentration, she remained at home sketching on the fourth day after her visit to the capitol so assiduously that when she paused from fatigue it was luncheon time. As she surveyed the tentative designs spread before her she realized that she had not made much progress. Somehow her imagination had hung fire; but this did not disturb her, for not infrequently a suitable scheme was not evolved until after several experiments. Saying to herself that she would try again to-morrow, she decided to seek the fresh air and take luncheon at the City Club.

As Mary stepped out into the hall she noticed that the door of Mr. Bartlett's apartment was wide open. She crossed to the elevator and was about to press the button when her attention was arrested by the full view afforded her from this point of her water-color—that which the occupant had purchased of his own accord not long after they became neighbors. She had not seen the sketch lately and never under such favorable conditions, for the single time when she had visited his rooms the light was artificial. Now as she gazed, the subject—a spirited-looking girl perched on a knoll amid the downs with the breeze playing on her face—seemed so lifelike that Mary moved a step nearer. The sketch was done in a free-hand manner. "Adventure" was the title she had given the study at the time. "It tells its own story, doesn't it?" she said to herself and while she stood thus preoccupied by the thought that she had less cause to be dissatisfied with this than with

many of her efforts, she was surprised by a voice which said:

"Don't be afraid, Mrs. Arnold. Walk straight in. Mr. Bartlett won't be here to-day, and we're giving his rooms a thorough airing."

It was the housekeeper who spoke. Unperceived by Mary, she had emerged from another suite—there were four apartments on each floor—and was standing on the threshold. "Do," she added. "The maid has just finished dusting and they look real cosey for a bachelor."

Mere curiosity would not have tempted Mary. But the combination of the chance to inspect leisurely her neighbor's apartment with that of scrutinizing the picture in broad daylight made her hesitate. After all, why not? The suggestion had emanated from Mrs. Barstow; Mr. Bartlett was an elderly man and would not mind; so far as the proprieties were concerned, she could afford to dismiss them; and besides other reasons for entering, there was the opportunity to look out of his windows and ascertain how the view compared with her own. Accordingly, with a word of explanation to Mrs. Barstow that she wished to renew her acquaintance with the picture, she stepped inside.

The housekeeper, having done the honors with a flourish that betokened pride in the snug interior, asked to be excused, alleging other demands upon her time. But before going she begged the visitor to make herself at home and stay as long as she liked, adding that there was no possibility of interruption by the occupant, as he was out of town. Nor would it even be necessary for Mrs. Arnold to close the door on her departure as there was a maid at work in the adjoining suite who would attend to everything.

Mary's only idea when she found herself alone was to study her picture, which was most favorably placed

for being seen at this time of day as it caught just the proper light from the bay-windows. She did so at varying distances for several minutes; then she turned to the other pictures, of which there were a number on the walls. Predilection for the sort of art he liked (to quote his own avowal) was Mr. Bartlett's only hobby. But his taste was good and his small collection—so Mary reflected as she looked around her—relieved the general effect of the room, which in other respects was commonplace. She and the children had taken afternoon tea there in order that the hospitality need not be all on one side. This was some time ago and after the lamps were lighted. Now the colors and proportions of the furnishings stood out so that nothing escaped the eye. The furniture was commodious, the upholsteries were irreproachably uninteresting, there were the usual relics of bygone days (knickknacks of various sorts) which deck an elderly bachelor's apartment. But the room was certainly cosey, and owing to the pictures had almost an atmosphere of distinction. It was this impression which led Mary, after she had satisfied her curiosity regarding the view from the windows, to take a second look around her.

Her interest in appraising the details passed over the purely masculine belongings—pipes, easy chairs, tobacco-jars, and accumulated pamphlets, and centred on sundry photographs which faced her from different angles, faded for the most part and nearly all of her own sex. Members of his family, some of them, without doubt, so she reflected; it was apparent from the quaint costumes that the association dated far back; and none of them looked like actresses. Mary believed that in the middle-aged woman looking out from the morocco frame on the centre-table she recognized his mother. But she was curious as to the identity of the three girls, each of

them in the early twenties, and each attractively individual in her way. His sisters maybe—or, not improbably, one, at least, a sister's friend whom he had wished to marry.

The conjecture appealed to Mary and she nursed it until she fixed on one—the plainest of the trio—as his sister. She fancied that she saw a likeness; besides there were two photographs of her and only one apiece of the others, a blonde and a brunette remarkably dissimilar in type. Mr. Bartlett had never spoken of his family; but evidently he must have known some women well in his younger days, and he had never married. He had constantly impressed her as a lonely, almost a disconsolate man, shut off against his preference from feminine society. If these now faded lips should speak, would they not supply the clew to his celibacy? Which was the one he had pined for and lost? Mary appreciated that the inquiry bordered on prying, but unable to resist the infatuation of trying to decide, she re-examined in turn and wavered between the blonde propped in a frame against the mantelpiece and the rival who occupied a bracket above Mr. Bartlett's desk.

Which of the young women did she prefer? Though acknowledging that choice was difficult, she decided that if she were a man, she should incline to the fair-haired girl with regular features rather than to the dusky maid who brought to mind "the dark lady of the sonnets." The latter had more personality perhaps, but the fair-haired girl looked safer. Having arrived advisedly at this nice distinction, Mary remembered that after all they might merely be his cousins. But in the endeavor to find some substitute for so flat an alternative she winced with disquietude at the unpleasant possibility which suggested itself. The owner of the rooms was a bachelor, but assuredly they must be respectable girls. Despite this

disclaimer, the effect of the self-evolved insinuation on Mary's mind was such that she again studied searchingly the photograph nearest to her—that on the mantelpiece. Having satisfied herself that the blonde was irreproachable beyond the shadow of a doubt, she sought the desk, which stood in an embrasure, and took down the “dark lady” from the bracket. After a moment's close scrutiny she shook her head. The girl was older than she had supposed at first and might be thirty, but she felt confident that her momentary disquietude was a false alarm. Nevertheless between thankfulness that the suspicion was unfounded, surmise that, notwithstanding, Mr. Bartlett's private life would probably not bear looking into, and quasi-disgust that sophistication had made her so prone to conjure up evil, she drew a sigh; and having replaced the photograph by leaning across the desk, she stood pensive for a moment.

Suddenly her eyes fixed on the open blotter were attracted by a vaguely familiar yellow envelope protruding from one of the pigeonholes. Where had she seen one like it? What was the association? Instantly she recalled that Mr. Bartlett had given her a glimpse of one very similar earlier in the week. If so, why should not this be the same; and, if the same, why might it not contain the incriminating documents on the production of which Oliver's fate depended? The wonder shaped itself so definitely and boldly that Mary glanced at the open door. Strange that it should have been left there, if the papers were so important; yet the depository was safe enough unless one were on the lookout for them. It was the only yellow envelope in sight and of a shade not very common. Conscious for the moment of nothing but an irresistible desire to satisfy her curiosity she hesitated, then put out her hand and took the packet from its hiding-place.

The superscription plainly legible on one end of the envelope indicated the contents. Thrilling at the import, Mary drew them forth far enough to gather that they were a series of documents relative to contracts for materials; she got a glimpse of specifications and figures. Confident that these were the incriminating papers, she hastily thrust them back into the envelope. Her cheeks were burning, her excitement was almost jubilant, and as she stood motionless with the packet in her hand she felt herself the prey of an impetuous initiative with clear-cut plans that offered concise reasons. "It's a lucky chance and you ought to take advantage of it. If you put them back, Oliver will be ruined. If you don't, he may escape; and if he does, he will owe his escape to you, not to Sybil."

Mary's brain seemed so clear that reasoning and action were virtually simultaneous. As she concealed the envelope under her jacket, she knew that she was deliberately and defiantly misappropriating it. Moving circumspectly yet without haste, she passed through the room, crossed the hall, and entered her own apartment. Seating herself, she sought to steady her nerves, for her heart was beating tumultuously, and listen. Not a sound; she felt sure that no one had observed her. But what did it matter if she were suspected later? The papers would be no longer in existence. To examine them first and then destroy them was the programme which had already suggested itself. Tremulous, yet elated at having conceived the project and grasped at opportunity, she felt desirous to know the full extent of the rascalities before reducing the proofs to ashes. With this in view she drew the packet from its hiding-place; but just as she was in the act of unfolding it, there came a ring at the door which to her guilty senses seemed unusually sharp.

Mary sprang to her feet, clutching as she did so the precious documents. It would never do not to answer the bell; or to be found with them in her possession. While she hastily looked about her for some appropriate place to conceal them, it occurred to her agitated faculties that they might have been missed already. If she did not get rid of them before she answered the summons, she might be prevented from making away with them. Her first impulse was to burn them; but only the embers of the fire were left; and partial combustion might betray her.

Once more the bell rang; this time imperatively. Separating the papers into two bundles so that their thickness should not baffle her, Mary tore them across again and again with all her might until they were in little pieces. Then she huddled the mass of fragments into her blouse, and walked toward the door.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE visitor confronting Mary proved to be merely a messenger who held out a letter. So great was her relief that she took it from him mechanically and after closing the door laid it on the table without even looking at the address. Now that the threatened peril had become negligible and left her free to substitute complete demolition for the makeshift to which she had resorted, she sank into a chair, grateful yet wondering at her alarm, and proceeded to extricate the pieces of the torn-up letters from her blouse.

When the litter lay upon her lap she regarded it a little ruefully, conscious that somehow the interruption had altered her perspective toward the episode. Saying to herself that she had meant to read the letters, she began to piece some of the scraps together, a task so tedious that she discontinued it and let them fall. There was nothing to do except to dispose of the fragments. Yet, as she looked toward the fireplace, she asked herself, seemingly for the first time—what was it she had done and why had she done it?

The answer to the second inquiry was immediate; she had taken the letters in the hope of saving Oliver. In her recoil from the subtler implication to which this led, Mary turned to the deed itself only to find it wore a new aspect. Taken the letters? Nay, she had stolen them. She had utilized her chance presence in the apartment of a confiding friend to purloin his private papers. Nor was this the whole. She had done away with the evidence of knavery which ought to be exposed,

and thereby sheltered the foes of decent government. A single short and ugly word described her conduct—she was a deliberate thief.

Appalled by the indictment, and staring at the proofs of her guilt, Mary sought in vain to ward off the pitiless succession of insurgent thoughts that rose within her. She had committed an act of dishonor, an underhand crime utterly repugnant to all her ideals and inconsistent with the most primary standards of conduct. She, Mary Arnold, whose life had been dedicated to showing how a woman under temptation should behave and how she could avoid temptation, had wilfully done that of which none but the lowest type of man would be capable. The thought made her wince. Undeniably any man unless utterly void of character would have cut his hand off sooner than be guilty of her offence; the desire would never have come to him. Yet, she, Mary Arnold, had yielded and yielded wantonly. How was she to account for this? Were not women better than men? She had always taken this for granted.

While Mary thus reproached herself, the room seemed to have grown still. She was no longer tense and had become merely miserably dejected. She had ceased to fear detection; any one might enter for all she cared. Her sole concern for the moment was to find a clew to her mysterious conduct besides the formula which still made itself heard with parrot-like iteration—"in order to save Oliver." Her thoughts seemed to her to be going round in a circle which always ended at this point and then began again. She acknowledged herself humiliated and crushed. Covering her face with her hands and confronting her soul in a last attempt to reconcile her monstrous lapse with righteousness, she became aware of a curious inconsistency in her anguish; she was horrified and disgusted, but she felt no remorse. On the

contrary, she knew that if she could restore the papers intact at the price of her husband's safety, she would not consent to do so.

What was the meaning of such a contradiction? Mary musing, recognized presently that it could only signify that her interest in averting Oliver's downfall was so much greater than she had been aware that it had brought her to this plight. The imputation caused her cheeks to tingle with a mixture of annoyance and furtive embarrassment. "But I don't love him; I don't love him," she expostulated beneath her breath. "Even grant that I would be willing to go back under certain conditions, we never could be what we were to one another. It would not be love." Mary felt so sure of her reasoning that she turned upon herself triumphantly. Clearly there must be some other explanation. A moment later her brow clouded before the relentlessness of the challenge—"What did actuate you then? The deed is done."

She sat for a while anguished and distressed. What was the logic of the situation? For she had ever prided herself on having a logical mind. The answer which came drove a wave of blood from her heart so that it surged about her temples—"there's nothing left except jealousy." Mary realized with an abhorrent start that she had hit upon the truth. But anger came with enlightenment. She felt her eyes flash with protest, then she bowed her head in dire confession. It was her jealousy which had egged her on; her fear lest somehow Sybil and not she would save Oliver. Galling as was the fact, she was fiercely jealous of Sybil. She had been jealous of her from the moment when she had first detected Sybil's designs on Oliver.

Aghast at the humiliating revelation, Mary's first instinct was to refute it by the syllogistic method. If

this were true, she argued, she was the victim of a force beyond her control. To be jealous should imply admiration, and she had always despised Sybil—still despised her. Surely nature had played her false by putting thoughts into her mind which clashed utterly with all she meant to be. Could she be merely a puppet after all—a victim of the laughing gods?

The bitterness of this idea grated on her spirit no less than the hideous discovery. It seemed to her as if the edifice of noble living in which she had dwelt had collapsed and that she lay prostrate among the ruins, sick at heart and without initiative. She had tried to stand for the finest things as she saw them, and now her life was tarnished. She was jealous, unworthily jealous against her will. Did not this necessarily presuppose that her love for her husband was not dead as she had believed, but that she loved him still in spite of herself and involuntarily? Once more the ironic gods were laughing at her. Something within her which she believed stifled forever had made her violate in its behalf honor and probity.

Once more with rueful eyes Mary looked down at the heap of fragments in her lap. It occurred to her again that she could piece them together so as to be legible, but she refrained, realizing that she still lacked the impulse to make atonement by restitution. She understood in her heart that, despite horror in the abstract, she would be likely for the same cause to repeat her performance. She was aware of a sense of detachment which minimized the act by viewing it from a feminine angle. From a man's it appeared clearly detestable and vile; nothing could be worse. But from a woman's, somehow even now, it seemed venial, if done for a sufficient motive.

This glimpse of self which proffered mitigation was

torturing nevertheless, and Mary clasped her hands in bewildering dismay. The world could not progress unless people were honest. If women aspired to set the standards for humanity, surely they must be honest. Yet she herself was proved a deliberate thief and—what was equally incomprehensible—she was virtually glorying in her guilty deed. And the excuse? She could discern but one, humiliating as it was, which could save her from frenzy and perdition—that she was intended to be like this; was so created that when her heart's ulterior purpose was at stake all other virtues dwindled. An irrational, capricious woman; how often she had bridled at the ignominy of the phrase. Yet it was now applicable to herself. On no other theory could she, a high priestess of her sex, explain what had happened.

Nature appeared to have circumvented her. She had believed herself a certain sort of person only to be proved fundamentally different. This was the obvious conclusion to be drawn from her predicament. Mary sat brooding over her tragic quandary, reluctant to admit the truth of the invidious taunt which took all the savor out of life, yet confronted by the facts. She was a felon; there was no escape from this. With quivering lips she sat for some moments harassed by distress. "No, no," her spirit cried, "you're really not like that; it was an accident."

This was cold comfort, but she grasped at it. An accident? She shook her head. If so, all the more blameworthy and inexcusable. Extenuation could not help her spiritually. Brooding again, she recollected presently that this was the substance of the plea which Ham had urged in Oliver's behalf, and which she had spurned almost with contempt. The details of her last conversation with Ham recurred to her poignantly. She had insisted that men and women were equally suscep-

tible to the same temptations and he, in his zeal to convince her she was mistaken, had intimated that she did not know what she was talking about and had finally lost his temper, uttering remarks which had lowered him—the hitherto blameless Ham—in her estimation.

If men and women were equally culpable under all circumstances, how did she explain her own extraordinary behavior? No upright man could have acted so; yet was she not an upright woman in spite of everything? She must cling to this or life would be unbearable. At the same time, it was clear that her argument had proved a boomerang which threatened to demolish all her theories. How was her conduct to be reconciled with the righteous purposes which she believed to be its mainsprings? If Oliver knew, he would regard her performance as heinous; whereas she, though paralyzed by what she had done, was ready at heart to make allowances for herself.

Allowances? As she thus leniently entertained the word the thought came to Mary that in Oliver's own case she had persistently refused to make any. She had remained unmollified through all these years though he had professed deep penitence. Stiffening instinctively at the memory of her wrongs, she protested that such a sin was wholly different and did not merit condonation, only to query in the next breath whether it was essentially more despicable than theft. But despite the logic of this indictment she clung to the conviction that her offence was not comparable in depravity with his. Yet even so, where did this leave her? Granted that his was the unpardonable sin, at best she had fallen from her high estate and was forever disgraced in her own eyes. From the point of view of sheer morality she had no ground to stand on. How was she ever to regain her self-respect? In another moment the despair which this

stunning acknowledgment of culpability produced had wrung from Mary the inquiry—could it be that she had judged Oliver too harshly, been too obdurate in her unwillingness to forgive?

The answer involved a new appraisal of the past; and as Mary essayed this under the guidance of her own abasement, she sought to put herself in Oliver's place. She passed in swift retrospect their married life. For the first time she harbored the doubt whether it had been fair to throw him so much with Sybil and she wondered whether she had not been a fool. As she sat searching her soul, the remembrance of Sybil's scornful sallies carried a new meaning, which dovetailed into the stern expostulation of Ham, her would-be champion. Had her egoism and vanity so blinded her eyes to natural laws that not her husband but she herself was shown to be most to blame? She recalled that Sybil had told her this in downright terms, to which she had closed her ears; and this was in substance the import of Ham's reluctant loyalty. She had trifled with sex—that was the charge against her; had harnessed the life force to her chariot with the result that it had ground her in the dust; had glorified in the name of virtue—most sinister of imputations—her own frigidity of temperament.

The glimpse thus afforded Mary of the estimate which others had of her put the finishing touch to her misery, for though her spirit cried out that the charges were false and that she had been cruelly misunderstood, she recognized that if her attitude toward life was open to such an interpretation, her experiment had fallen far short of success. It mattered little that her aims were noble and that she still fervently subscribed to them, if the effect produced on the people whom she sought to influence was so different from her intention. Nevertheless, each of the strictures rankled, and particularly

the last—that she had unsexed herself. How monstrous and how baseless! To think that she who prided herself on her intensity and who yearned to idealize passion should be deemed irresponsible to nature. Sexless? Ah no, on the contrary, she was exuberant with sex—sex as it ought to be. Sexless? What was it indeed but the mysterious, baffling instinct of sex which had conducted her to this very pass?

Unaware for the moment that it confounded her, Mary embraced this semblance of succor with the resistless clutch of one drowning. The support which it gave her by the assurance that she was normal after all enabled her to rally her flagging energies. She realized that it was incumbent on her not to sit there longer brooding. Some positive course was necessary, and her first step must be to complete her unsavory deed by obliterating the traces of the crime. She proceeded to gather from her lap the mass of fragments, then rose with the intention of consigning them to the flames after she had stirred the fire. As she stood up, Mary noticed the letter which in her intense preoccupation she had dropped upon the table and then forgotten. Reaching for it, she gasped with surprise as she recognized the handwriting. A note from Oliver and sent by special messenger; why was he writing her? What could it be about? How strange that he should be communicating with her at just this time!

Laying aside her heap of scraps, Mary opened the envelope with nervous fingers. She saw at a glance that the contents were very short, barely a page, and that the sender's well-known signature was at the foot. The opening adjective "imperative" conveyed to her wondering senses as she read an import of urgency and resolution. Matters could not continue as they were—this was the summary announcement, and obviously some

fresh occurrence was responsible for so determined a state of mind. Oliver was coming to see her; and with what object in view? He must have either her or his liberty? What did he mean by this? The question of a divorce had never been broached between them; he had at no time intimated that he desired one. Mary perused the opening paragraphs again, reflecting. To one reading between the lines was not the veiled significance clear as crystal? The letter was plainly a notification that if she would not return to her husband, he would marry Sybil if he could.

Oliver was coming to-morrow for her decision and expected to find her at home. So much was evident, but what answer did he hope for? Was he yearning to have her back, or would he be better pleased if she repulsed his advances and gave him his freedom? Mary stood, with the letter in her hand, rooted to the spot, weighing this doubt. Her position from the first had been that Sybil was welcome to him; she had told her as much at the time. Now that Henry Thornton was dead, if Oliver wished for a divorce, she would not stand in his way. Mary, having tremulously decided this, recalled that the language of the letter was couched in the alternative, which admitted several possibilities. Oliver either loved her still or he loved Sybil; he could not be in love with both. Nevertheless the ring of piteous desperation in his appeal was consistent with exhausted patience and might signify that Sybil stood only second best. He might be asking her to choose in that sense; and if so, what would her answer be?

The likelihood of this last possibility grew upon Mary as she considered it. The invitation to take Oliver back in order not to drive him into the arms of Sybil, though not wholly flattering to her self-esteem, was surely a partial victory. Could she afford to reject it for his sake,

if not for her own, if it were offered? Any reunion would be at best a truce, but might they not be passably happy if the terms of the surrender were correctly comprehended? If he must have a wife, could she not afford to waive her scruples to that extent rather than hand him over against his choice to the woman who had ruined their lives? This would be taking him at his word—his word as it cried out from the paper in her hand.

Mary said to herself that she need not decide until to-morrow; then with a sudden start she eagerly re-examined the letter, and perceiving that it bore the date of the previous day, glanced with agitation at the clock. It appeared that to-morrow was to-day, and that Oliver might arrive at any moment. Deploring her stupidity in having neglected to look at the date, she reasoned that he had retained the letter overnight in order to despatch it by a messenger who could report to him that she was at home when it was delivered. Doubtless Oliver was on his way already.

Throbbing with excitement, Mary turned instinctively to the remnants of the torn-up correspondence which she had dropped into a brass bowl upon the table. It would never do not to dispose of them before Oliver should appear upon the scene. With this in mind she stepped to the hearth and, stirring to life the languid embers, put a fresh piece of wood upon the fire. As she waited for it to kindle, her first thought was self-congratulatory; it would be due to her and her alone that Oliver's political future was no longer jeopardized. He would be none the wiser as to the means by which the peril was averted, and she need never divulge them to him. Some day perhaps in the dim future she might venture to do so. But Mary's gleam of complacency vanished before the reflection—suppose Oliver were to be told

now, what would he think of her performance? He could not fail to be horrified. There was no shadow of doubt as to his attitude; he would despise her. If he knew, it would be impossible for him to take advantage of her action without becoming a partner in her dishonor. Assuming they were man and wife again, would he not feel an obligation to betray her rather than compound her crime by silence?

Mary shrank from the vividness of her portrayal. It was obvious that she had hampered rather than assisted him—blasted his true prospects instead of helping him on. Unless she should hug her guilty secret and live a covert criminal, Oliver would spurn her. By trying to save him she had made him an unwitting accessory to party exoneration which he would be the first to repudiate as utterly repugnant to his masculine code of honor. So intense was her reaction that she murmured: "I cannot bear it." The prospect of living together and yet brooding over this hideous secret seemed to her incompatible with retaining her reason. What was she to do? Was there no avenue of escape from her dilemma? Surely she must contrive before it was too late some means of neutralizing the consequences of her stupendous blunder.

As she ransacked her brains for a resource, Mary reseated herself at the table and ruefully surveyed the contents of the brass bowl. She regretted now keenly that she had mutilated the papers; otherwise she might have been able to replace them in Mr. Bartlett's desk before he discovered their loss. She felt sorry too that she had not been able to read them. But either to patch the fragments together or restore them to their owner was now clearly out of the question. To destroy them, as she had already planned, and say nothing to anybody seemed the only wise course. While thus reflecting and

toying mechanically with the scraps of paper, she suddenly observed marks of red ink on one of them. Scrutiny revealed portions of two words, which as they stood imported nothing. Led by this discovery to wonder as to the significance of the red ink, she began to search for other signs of it, and almost immediately she came across a second fragment similarly marked. Placing the two side by side, it was plain that though they did not correspond exactly, they were evidently correlated and that the incomplete words on each belonged to the same sentence. Surmising that here was a possible escape from her dilemma, she emptied the mass of fragments upon the table and proceeded carefully to sort them.

Mary's eyes sharpened by her quest, detected at once that, thorough as she had intended her work of demolition to be, certain good-sized strips had escaped the process of tearing. These strips she separated and spread before her after the method of one seeking to put together a chopped-up map or picture puzzle. Suddenly on the back of one of them as she turned it over she perceived the red handwriting. As she fitted in this larger scrap between the two others her heart gave a bound, for to her amazement the united inscription plainly read: "These letters are a copy of," and ended there. The sentence was still obviously incomplete, but who could doubt its import? The electrified Mary grasped joyously at the hope that the papers which she had appropriated were merely copies, and that the originals were in existence and safely guarded elsewhere.

Intent on proving that she was not the victim of a delusion, Mary excitedly resumed her search for the missing words which would make or mar her happiness. Until they were found, she could not feel sure that her interpretation of the sentence was correct. Yet, though

such good fortune seemed too astounding to be really true, its inherent likelihood grew upon her as she hunted. Was it credible that so astute and secretive a man as Mr. Bartlett should have left in a pigeonhole of his desk, within the reach of a chance visitor, valuable originals that could not be replaced? Now that she put the question to herself for the first time, her own assumption that he had been so simple-minded struck her as fatuous, and she marvelled at her credulity.

Keenly on the alert for the red ink, Mary pounced on two more fragments as she sifted the avalanche of paper through her fingers. She saw by the clock that the minutes were flying; but the afternoon was still young and she figured that not improbably Oliver might delay his coming until tea-time. With exculpation hanging in the balance, the suspense was agonizing. What was to become of her in case the clew proved deceptive after all? Scarcely had she formulated this plaint when she came across two pieces, the telltale inscription on which was so copious that it covered the surface of each. As she eagerly scrutinized them, her heart leaped to her mouth; then with a gasp of triumphant relief she sank back into her chair. They were the missing links, and they confirmed her hopes. Uncertain whether to laugh or to cry, she felt on the verge of fainting. Leaning toward the table, she fitted the two bits of paper into place and scanned the completed sentence, which proclaimed the entire correspondence to be copies of the originals, exactly as she had surmised. It appeared that the red ink had been utilized solely as a label for the packet. She was saved, yes she was saved; but how egregiously fantastic that she, a serious-minded modern woman, should have put herself in such a sorry pass and been so miraculously rescued. Yet the strange network of facts that taxed belief were no longer disputable. She had

disgraced herself and she owed her safety to a fluke, yet, now she could destroy the evidences of her baseness with a tranquil mind. Moreover, she would do so speedily, and then Oliver need never know.

Thus impelled, Mary seized the brass bowl and swept into it the heap of fragments on the table, then walked to the hearth and emptied the contents into the now brightly burning fire. She watched with joy the flames lick up and shrivel them; they disappeared in a trice. What a nightmare, she reflected, and what an escape, and what a consummate fool she had been! How was she ever to look herself in the face again? How was her behavior to be reconciled with all she had stood for hitherto? As she thus mused, standing beside the mantel, the bell of her apartment sounded. It must be Oliver, she thought, and she had not been a minute too soon. Now she would discover the true significance of his letter.

This time Mary's surmise proved correct. As she opened the door, Oliver, large, erect, and vigorous, stood on the threshold. "May I come in?" he asked with smiling yet resolute wistfulness.

The sound of his once familiar voice seemed strange to Mary after all these years. She noted too that his appearance was slightly altered; he had grown heavier; his face looked care-worn; but it expressed the prime of mental vigor. "I was expecting you," she said, and showed him in.

Oliver closed the door and looked around with curiosity. "This is a very attractive apartment," he said; then added, as if to relieve his remark from sheer conventionality: "You know I've never seen it."

"Won't you sit down?" she said. Though she deprecated restraint, formality seemed requisite under all the circumstances.

He did so, and began: "You've read my letter, Mary?"

"Yes, Oliver."

"Then you know why I'm here—without an invitation."

"I'm not quite sure."

"I've come to beg you to return."

"The letter said so. And if, for both our sakes, it seems best that I refuse, you want your liberty—in order to marry again?"

Her directness disconcerted him so that he seemed to hesitate. "I wish to be free to marry. Yes, I should hope to marry."

"And Sybil—not unnaturally?"

The relentless question, though dispassionately put, as if an anticipated and foregone conclusion, moved Oliver to imitate her frankness.

"I should hope to, if she would have me." He paused a moment. "I've no reason to believe she would. But a man needs a home. I'm married in name, yet have no wife. That has been the situation for over seven years. I can't endure it any longer. So I have come to—to ask you to reconsider."

"That is, come to give me one more chance?"

Oliver quivered slightly at the challenge, then his brow grew stern. "If you choose to put it in that way, Mary."

"Choose?" Her intonation was tragic. "This is no time for artifice or bandying phrases, I'm well aware. You've come here to find out; you're anxious to ascertain the truth; but so am I. Don't interrupt me for a moment, please. We don't need to discuss your liberty. I restored it to you from the first, or meant to. If my co-operation is necessary to set you free, I'll sign any papers. The point that troubles me is very different.

You've offered me an alternative; well, supposing we patch our differences up and live together again with the result that neither of us is happy—where should we be?"

"I'd do my uttermost to make you happy," he pleaded stoutly.

"You'd try undoubtedly. It's your happiness rather that I have in mind." Mary smiled wanly at his puzzled look. "This is too critical a moment in what is left of our two lives to equivocate and not be candid with ourselves. How can I be sure which is the alternative you wish me to accept? Sure that you're not secretly hungering for your liberty, as you call it? If I returned to you and you should find that Sybil was the one you really longed for—our misery would be worse than ever. You do not love us both; a man can't be in love with two women at the same time." Tense, yet still dispassionate, she looked him straight in the face. Though Oliver could not escape confusion, for the telltale blood suffused his face at her acute detection of his late quandary, he cried in remonstrance:

"I swear to you, dear, that you're the one I'm longing for."

"Your letter told me so. I'm not accusing you of conscious insincerity. My fear is that you are self-deceived by the surface proprieties of the case. Sybil's still beautiful; you've been very lonely; I realize her attractions better perhaps than I once did; and so it wouldn't be altogether strange, and I should no longer have the right to feel affronted—if you secretly preferred her."

While he listened with wondering ears and guilty yet protesting conscience to his wife's tacit disparagement of her own charms and power, Oliver was already up-

braiding himself for having even harbored doubt. Still in his eyes a goddess on a heaven-kissing hill as on the first day when he had met her, Mary transfigured by her humility had become suddenly indispensable to him: "Why do you talk like that? There never has been really any one but you. You always have been, always will be, my ideal of womanhood."

Bending forward, he strove to grasp her hand, but she drew back and sighed. "I wonder. Consider, Oliver."

"I've never blamed you for not understanding—for thinking me a monstrous libertine; but my—er—in-fatuation for Sybil was really an accident."

"Yes, I know. Your apologists urged that some time ago."

"My apologists?"

"Ham and the others. Ham stood by me at the time; but lately I can see that he thinks me too obdurate and that I should have forgiven you sooner."

"Ah, Mary, then you have forgiven me at last?" he cried transported.

"It isn't a question of forgiveness longer, nor as to who was most to blame." Low in her chair and avoiding his gaze, she spoke with gentle melancholy as if soliloquizing. "They say I neglected you, sacrificed you to my career and then threw Sybil in your way; and so have only myself to blame. Their logic is that I could have kept you faithful by obliterating myself; while I took for granted that I could trust you."

"You had a right to, Mary. Your bringing Sybil into the house and letting her perform so many of a wife's functions doesn't seem prudent now in the light of the past, but I have never regarded that as palliation of my conduct. You had a right to expect that I'd be faithful and would not need watching. As to the neglect—you

were self-absorbed. What of it? So was I. If you've been thinking, I have also during these lonely years. Apart from the offence which drove you from the house, I owe you an apology for my obtuseness in taking your work so lightly. I patronized you, regarded your earnings as pin-money and failed to comprehend until it was too late that you were straining every nerve to make your life count professionally. You were entitled to express your individuality and genius, though you were my wife. And, think, how you've succeeded! You're a distinguished landscape-gardener—known all over the country. I never supposed it possible, and there's where I was woefully blind. Whatever you decide, I want you to know that I realize all this."

"Oh, Oliver," she murmured turning toward him, "that is generous of you. Yes, I did think you blind." She clasped her hands in tragic agitation. "O God, I meant so well, I meant so well. And it can't be, can it, that I was wholly on the wrong track; that marriage not to end in disaster must adhere to the old-fashioned terms—all the glory and all the initiative for the man and nothing but menial tasks and resignation for the woman? I was merely trying to raise us both to a high level and instead my experiment seems to have proved a wretched failure."

"Don't say so, Mary. It was my experiment, too. You *were* on the right track, and there was no difference of opinion between us. Don't you remember how in our talks before our marriage we agreed that the old standards as to husband and wife were obsolete because of their injustice? You simply lived along those lines, and, whatever the contributing causes, it was really I who broke our compact. You couldn't continue living with me then. But that was an eternity ago, and I've

eaten my heart out in anguish because of it. Say that you'll come back, Mary, and give me a chance to make amends for the past."

"A woman must be faithful to her marriage vows under all circumstances under penalty of social ostracism. Is it too much to ask that the same punishment be meted out to a man? We were tacitly agreed before we married that this was the standard which needed rectifying most of all."

Ignoring his request, Mary spoke contemplatively, as one who suspects a fallacy in a dogma very precious to her.

"Yes; and it's only fair to myself," he interposed, "to tell you that I've lived up ever since to the standard which we set for ourselves. I was bound to convince you that my contrition was genuine and my offence but a mischance. I swear to you that I've been absolutely true to my marriage vows through all these years that we have lived apart; and it wasn't always easy."

Mary's color heightened, partly because of the sturdy avowal which settled forever a tormenting doubt, partly because of the genuine implication that other men in his place would have acted differently and that he took to himself a grain of credit because of his resistance. Conscious once more that destiny was playing strange tricks with her and that a paradox latent throughout their interview was striving for expression, she lowered her eyes, seeking for words which would not utterly abase her.

"Well, Mary, what's your answer?"

The tone was suppliant yet definitive, and he looked every inch a man. She could not bear to let him go—so much was plain; yet the only excuse for letting him

stay was to reveal her ignominy. Raising her eyes, she looked him in the face and said:

"Oliver there's something more I wish to say to you. So far you've missed the crucial point—the vital consideration that weighs with me. I referred to it just now, but digressed in order to confess to my shortcomings. It's a simple matter to go back to you. The children and our friends would all be overjoyed. I don't suppose we've changed much, either you or I. We're the same people plus experience—which perhaps would help a little. It's time I should go back; the fear is that I've stayed away too long—assuming that I love you, Oliver, and that you love me."

"Then what's to hinder?" he cried and leaned forward to take her in his arms.

Mary repulsed him gently. "I said 'assuming.' You believe now that you love me, but in your secret heart you're scarcely sure. If I should let you go, you'd marry and six months later be very thankful that I restored your liberty."

"Ah, no," he interrupted with impetuosity, "dismiss that fatal fancy."

"Fatal? You're word is apt. But not a fancy, Oliver; rather a fact we both must face, but chiefly I. It seems indeed to be my punishment."

"Your punishment?" he faltered.

Mary smiled at his perplexity. "You don't yet understand, Oliver." She paused, then she continued: "I thought—I even hoped my love for you was dead. It's hard to say what's in my mind to tell you. After our interchange of confidences to-day, you wouldn't have me call my theories unsound and cringingly own myself the chief sinner. You're far too just for that, and I too certain that truly happy marriages are no longer necessarily

founded on the old-fashioned basis. If I return, it doesn't mean that I consider what you did excusable, or think we can ever be to each other all that we should have been. Then why do I return?—you'll ask me. The reason is the really puzzling wonder of this all. You'd never believe unless I told you that all the while you've been here I've been struggling not to think, 'if Sybil is the one whom Oliver really cares for, I shall go mad; but I won't give him up to her.' That's what I've come to. And how do I account for this? I, who still cherish firmly my own convictions concerning what I owe to men and they to me. Here is the mystery; I can't account for it. I thought I understood myself completely; imagined I had all my emotions under lock and key ready to respond only to noble calls of my own choosing. Yet it seems as though there's something within me, insidious, illogical, insatiable, that I cannot control and that becomes either my shame—or my glory. Which is it, Oliver?"

Her voice broke into a sob. Burying her face in her hands, Mary wept convulsively, mourning her broken pride even in the moment of her capitulation. Too happy not to listen, too fascinated and amazed to interrupt, Oliver had allowed her to finish. In another moment his arm was around her and, while his lips sought hers, he poured forth comforting and passionate words. Yet still she wept eluding him; until at last she raised her head and with her hands against his shoulders, gazed at him as in the old days when she used to sweep the curling locks back from his forehead.

"O Oliver," she said piteously, while the tears glistened in her brilliant eyes, "I wonder if we can be happy!"

He folded her to his breast by way of reassurance,

and as Mary nestled there, her heart against his heart, she murmured: "It seems that whether I was in the right or in the wrong, nothing counts any longer except that I love you, Oliver, and that you say that you love me. This must be because I am a woman after all."

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